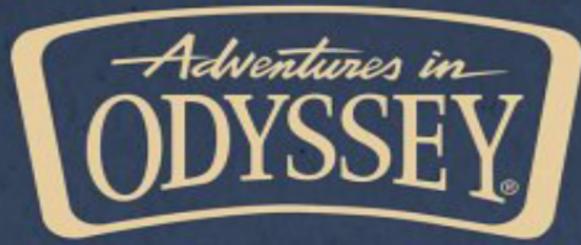


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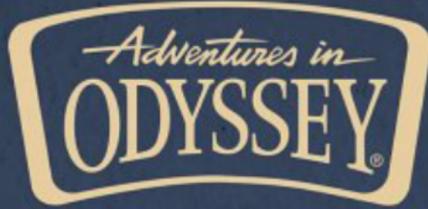


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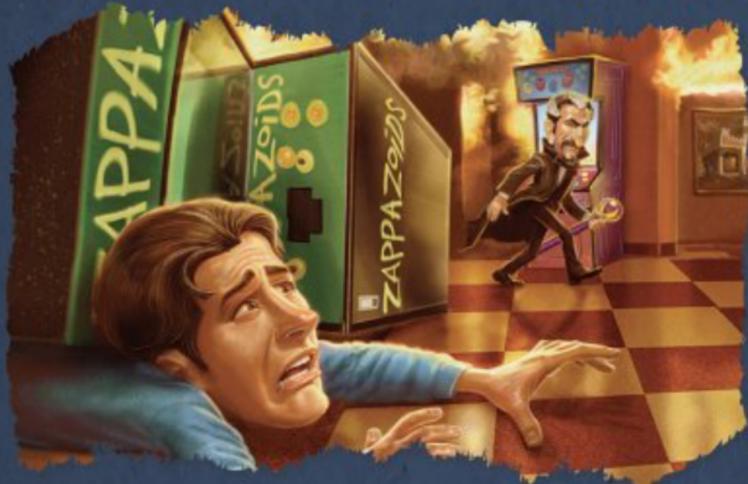


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PHIL LOLLAR



*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
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The Blackgaard Chronicles: *Rook's Ruse*

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*For
Earl Boen
and
Genesis Long*



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CHAPTER one



A-choo!

Dr. Regis Blackgaard pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his nose. "Dusty down here," he muttered. "But then, it is a tunnel." He replaced his handkerchief in his pocket, retrieved a folded parchment from a different pocket, unfolded it, and shone his flashlight on it.

It was a very old map detailing an intricate network of tunnels under the town of Odyssey. He held the flashlight between his teeth, the beam still illuminating the map, and from yet a third pocket, he pulled out a compass. He checked the direction of the needle and mentally calculated how far he had come and how much farther he had to go. Not far. Three more turns and he would arrive at his destination. He replaced the compass in his pocket, removed the flashlight from his mouth, and trudged forward.

Splash!

"Ugh! It's wet down here too." He shook the water and mud from his polished Italian-made calfskin loafers and continued on. "Should've worn heavier shoes."

He made one last turn, shone his flashlight down the dark tunnel in front of him, and followed the beam another twenty-five feet or so until it intersected at a T with another tunnel. He checked the map. If his calculations were correct, a left turn would take him out of the tunnels and into McAlister Park, while a right turn would lead him straight under the former Fillmore Recreation Center, now known as Whit's End. This was it; it had to be.

He folded and replaced the map in his coat pocket and then moved several feet into the left tunnel. He stopped, pulled a test tube from his coat, fished a switchblade knife from his pants pocket, clicked it open, and scraped a goodly amount of soil from the tunnel wall into the tube. He corked the tube, labeled it, and returned it to his coat. He then retraced his footsteps back to the T intersection, retrieved another test tube from his coat, scraped more soil from the tunnel wall into it, corked and labeled it, and put it back in his coat. He then went down the Whit's End portion of the tunnel and repeated the process.

Once he had pocketed the last tube, he looked at his knife for a long moment. He was suddenly very tempted to continue down the hallway and right into Whit's End, snoop around down in the basement for a while, perhaps go upstairs for a sundae at the soda fountain, and then use the knife to retrieve the other test sample he needed. But no—there would be time for that later.

He was almost certain Whittaker was aware of these tunnels; in fact, they were probably the reason he had outmaneuvered Councilman Glossman in purchasing the Fillmore Recreation Center five years ago. The old man was much smarter than he liked to let on. He and Whittaker would confront each other soon enough; there was no need to push things. Meanwhile, there were tests to run on the samples he had just collected.

He folded his knife, slipped it back in his pants pocket, pulled out the map, shone his flashlight on it, and headed back to Blackgaard's Castle.



“Well?” Blackgaard tapped his foot impatiently. He glared at the oily black hair that covered the back of the head of a brown-skinned man. The man wore a white lab coat and leaned over a microscope. No answer.

“Hakim, I’m waiting,” he growled.

“Patience, my friend,” came the reply, in a cultured Middle Eastern accent. “One cannot rush science.”

Blackgaard sighed, crossed his arms, and looked around the laboratory he had outfitted in the secret room under Blackgaard’s Castle. It was still pristine, except for the places where he had tracked in mud from the tunnel. The laboratory was also somewhat cluttered with boxes, some of which hadn’t yet been opened. He noticed the company label was still on many of them: Edgebiter Chemical. Blackgaard made a note to have Hakim remove the labels. He would need the company for future operations; there was no sense in needlessly exposing them at present.

Above the laboratory where he and Hakim were currently, the finishing touches were being put on the arcade and game room in time for the grand opening of Blackgaard’s Castle next week. And though the possibility of one of the workers—or even Glossman or Maxwell—stumbling in on them was remote, he wasn’t taking any chances.

Blackgaard’s Castle. He smiled at the name. Perhaps he should instead employ his family’s original surname: *Blagueur*. But maybe not—it was too French for the people in Middle America Odyssey. Besides, he had worked hard to make “Blackgaard” a name to be respected and feared. It was no small task, considering what it really meant. A *blagueur* is a jester, a joker, a prankster, even a liar. He chuckled. *That fits dear brother Eddie perfectly*, he thought. But a “blackgaard” or “blaggard” is the lowest of the low, a menial, a scoundrel, a cad—which *fits me perfectly*. He chuckled wryly again.

There was nothing amusing about the reason behind their family name change, though. His mother instituted it when they all left the Netherlands and went to live with her parents in England after World War II. All, that is, except for his father, Jannus.

The family hadn't seen him since he joined the Waffen-SS Volunteer Grenadier Brigade Landstorm Nederland. And that suited Blackgaard perfectly, though he sometimes wondered where his father ended up after the war.

When the Canadian armies liberated the Netherlands, his mother had moved with her twin boys to England to live with her family. Afraid that the stigma of her husband's German association would follow them, she gave the immigration officials her maiden name, Barnett. Eddie didn't seem to care, but Regis remembered pitching a perfect fit about it. For some reason he didn't understand. He didn't want to be a Barnett. He raised such a ruckus that he recalled the security guards looking in their direction and some even taking a few steps toward them.

Panicked, his mother capitulated and gave the immigration agent their actual name. But when the agent mispronounced "Blagueur" as "Blagaard," Regis decided he liked the sound of it even better and told his mother "Blagaard" would be just fine. Eddie still didn't seem to care. So their mother kept the new name, albeit with a slightly different spelling. She filled out the immigration form as "Yvette Blackgaard," and under "Children," she listed her twin sons, "Edwin" and "Regis." Under "Spouse," she wrote "deceased."

In school, their name was the object of much teasing and ridicule—at first. Regis soon saw to it that the name became a rumored force to be reckoned with. Schoolmates who snickered at it would find their homework shredded or their lunch infested with bugs or their gym shoes filled with mud. And a teacher who mocked the name wound up in the hospital when the front tire on his car suddenly flew off as he was rounding a curve on a country lane. "Somehow" the bolts holding the tire in place had loosened and

fallen away. Though no one could ever conclusively trace any of these events back to Regis, everyone knew who was responsible. As a result, they feared him and his name. And he liked that.

When the time came to go to university, Edwin studied acting and the arts at a British academy, while Regis pursued behavioral sciences at the University of Vienna. He excelled at his studies and eventually transferred to America to do his doctoral work at UC Berkeley. There he met Professor M, a brilliant chemist, who confided in him about a project that was so astounding, Regis could scarcely believe his ears, and yet, if true, it would change the world. That project had sent Regis Blackgaard all over the planet and had finally led him here, to Odyssey, and to the soil his own chemist now examined.

Hakim rose from his microscope, took off his glasses, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and began polishing the lenses. "Interesting," he muttered.

Blackgaard stopped tapping his foot and uncrossed his arms. "What is? Tell me, Hakim! Is it there or not?"

Hakim put on his glasses, stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket, and turned to face his boss. "Oh, yes. The mineral is there all right, and in great quantities."

Blackgaard smiled. "Excellent."

"That's what I find so interesting."

"What do you mean?"

Hakim shrugged. "I'm not sure why you think this particular mineral is so 'excellent.' It's just a mineral, and a completely inert one at that. It has no particular value. I can't understand why it's so important to you."

Blackgaard chuckled softly. "That is not your concern at present." He retrieved his cane and headed for the door leading into the hallway. "Thank you, Hakim. That will be all for now. Do clean up before you go—through the tunnel, of course."

"Certainly."

Blackgaard stopped at the door. "Oh, and please remove the remaining labels from these boxes and turn out the lights when you leave."

Hakim bowed slightly. "As you wish."

Blackgaard opened the sealed door to the lab, stepped into the hallway, and closed it behind him, making certain he heard the soft *click* of the security latch. He then pushed several stacks of boxes in place to conceal the door completely.

He heard the workers in the main room above still slaving away and knew he should check on their progress—the grand opening was this weekend. But he needed to change clothes first—he had a spare suit and shoes in the office.

He hoped Maxwell wasn't there; the young man would certainly notice the dust and mud and ask unneeded questions about them. Then again, he didn't want to stifle Maxwell's progress. For all of his snide remarks and rude behavior, surprisingly, he had turned out to be a hard worker—or at least he appeared that way. Who knew what was really going on with computer experts? It was unnerving.

Maxwell claimed to be setting up a "network," whatever that was, to control all the machines at Blackgaard's Castle and had been laying cable throughout the interior of the building. And yet, as of yesterday, he still hadn't finished setting up the main computer system in the office, which was the whole point of even having computers here in the first place. "Perhaps today . . ." Blackgaard muttered.

He opened the office door. "Or . . . not." The computer system still sat in boxes on and beside the desk. Blackgaard growled. "Time to lean on the sniveling little wretch again." He closed the door and crossed the room to an antique wardrobe, opened the mirrored doors, retrieved his spare suit and shoes from it, and headed for the bathroom.

His shoes really were a fright—caked with so much dirt and mud from the tunnel that he probably could have gotten the samples he needed from them instead of the tunnel walls. He removed a small chunk of mud from one sole and slowly rubbed it between his finger and thumb. Hakim could not have been more wrong. Professor M had told him the mineral in this soil was the catalyst of great power—and in more ways than one.

He hadn't believed the old man at first; one of the uses of the mineral was too outlandish and astonishing to be believed. But the other use was confirmed when a connection at the Department of Defense relayed information that they were working with the National Security Agency on a formula involving this mineral—a formula for a devastating weapon. A current operative at the agency had created the formula, with the assistance of a former operative: one John Avery Whittaker.

And their formula, rumor had it, was embedded in a powerful program on a secret computer concealed inside Whittaker's discovery emporium and soda shop.

A program called Applesauce.

CHAPTER TWO



“What a mess!”

Whit and Eugene stood in the main room of Blackgaard’s Castle, surveying a scene they could only describe as pandemonium. Dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of loud—very loud—kids ran around, mostly from one video game to another, the electronic *beeps, boops, and trills* of which adding to the cacophony. Used plastic soda cups and food-encrusted paper plates littered the place, stuffed into overflowing trash cans and stacked on tabletops. The stench of the trash, combined with the sweaty odor of hyperstimulated kids, made the air foul and sticky. The newly painted walls were streaked and splattered with stains, and the new carpet was already filthy and worn. *It’s Shakespearean*, Whit thought, “*full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.*”

Almost three months had passed since Tom Riley’s barn had burned down and Blackgaard had received his business license. Tom was back in fine fettle, having recuperated from mild injuries and smoke inhalation, thanks to the good care of his doctor and great nursing from his wife, Agnes. As for Tom’s horses, Leah suffered minor burns on her haunches, and Rachel cut her foreleg kicking her stall gate, but both had recovered completely.

Tom was busy supervising the construction of his new barn. Though he'd had great help from Whit and their friends the Barclay family, the project had been delayed due to Blackgaard hiring every contractor and construction worker in the county to get Blackgaard's Castle ready in time for its grand opening. That had happened almost two weeks ago, and the place was an instant hit. Everyone in town went, except for the crew at Whit's End, and since Blackgaard's Castle had siphoned off even its regular customers, Whit and Eugene took advantage of the lack of business to visit the madhouse. Whit had invited Connie to join them, but she flatly refused, preferring to stay in the serenity of the nearly deserted Whit's End.

Now that he'd had a look at the place, Whit agreed with her decision wholeheartedly. He scowled and repeated, "What. A. Mess!"

Eugene winced and leaned toward him, cupping a hand to his ear. "Beg pardon, Mr. Whittaker? I couldn't hear you."

"I said, 'What a mess!'" He shook his head. "Sound and fury, signifying nothing . . ."

"Ah! *Macbeth*—act 5, scene 5!" Eugene nodded brightly. "Indeed! Blackgaard's Castle seems to have been put together with careless abandon—there's no logic or flow to the displays at all."

"That's only part of it, Eugene. What's worse are the types of displays he has: video games, pinball machines . . . I know the games themselves are rather harmless, if played in moderation. But the images on some of them here are, well, seductive, and in some cases, downright demonic."

Eugene nodded. "Indeed, and speaking of demonic, over in the corner is Madam Ouga's Astrological Forecaster."

Whit made a face like he'd just chomped on a bad almond. "I know." He sighed. "All of this is popular, though. I recognize a lot of the kids here . . ."

A smooth, deep voice behind them crooned, "Well! If it isn't the infamous Mr. Whittaker! Welcome to my humble establishment."

Whit and Eugene turned. Walking up to them was the man himself, Regis Blackgaard. Whit nodded. "Doctor."

Blackgaard looked at Eugene appraisingly. "And you must be—now don't tell me . . . Rheinhold?"

Eugene stiffened. "Eugene."

Blackgaard gave him an ingratiating smile. "Yes, of course, forgive me. Well, I'm glad you finally decided to accept my invitation. I was beginning to think you wouldn't—we have been open for several weeks now."

"I wasn't aware that the definition of 'several' had changed to mean 'almost two,'" Eugene said curtly.

Blackgaard kept smiling. "Perhaps it just seems like several weeks. Time flies when you're busy, you know. But . . . where's Connie?"

"Back at Whit's End," replied Whit. "She didn't want to come for some reason."

Blackgaard nodded, still smiling. "Ah. Well, perhaps she'll make it another time." He took a few steps past them and gestured around the room. "So how do you like my little amusement house?"

"It's very . . . interesting, to say the least," said Eugene.

Blackgaard's smile turned into a smirk. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Eugene went on. "I noticed that all of your displays and activities are computerized. Are they run through a central system?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to talk to Richard about that," Blackgaard replied, shaking his head. "I'm somewhat illiterate when it comes to computers." He peered around the room. "I know he's here somewhere, probably with that young friend of his, uh . . . Lucy."

Whit's brow furrowed. "Lucy?"

"Yes," Blackgaard said brightly. "She's become something of a fixture here now, thanks to Richard." He leaned toward Whit and whispered conspiratorially, "I believe she has a crush on him." He

chuckled and placed a hand over his heart. "Oh, the pains of adolescence."

Whit frowned. "Yes."

Blackgaard clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "So, speaking as a professional, what does the great Whit think of Blackgaard's Castle?"

Whit looked around once again and tried his best to keep a neutral expression on his face. "Well . . . it's rather . . . *maddening*, isn't it?"

The doctor's eyebrows rose. "You mean the noise? Yes, it was a bit disturbing at first, but as I'm sure you know, you get used to it after a while."

"Do you always let the kids run wild this way?" asked Eugene.

"Children are free spirits, after all." Blackgaard shrugged. "They need room to play."

"Agreed," said Eugene. "But there should be some order, even in play."

"Nonsense," Blackgaard scoffed. "Children already have too much structure in their lives—at home, at school, at church." He sniffed haughtily. "What they need is freedom—"

Suddenly there was a loud "Aaaaarrrrgh!" followed immediately by a series of harsh thumps behind them. "What in the world!" Whit exclaimed, and when they turned he got an answer. Nathan, one of the former regulars at Whit's End, was wailing away at the Zappazoids machine, kicking and pounding it with his fists for all he was worth. Whit bounded over to him, followed closely by Eugene. Blackgaard brought up the rear.

"Nathan!" Whit barked. "Stop that!" He grabbed the boy's arm.

Nathan ceased flailing and jerked his head up at Whit, his face still flushed with anger. "Oh, hi, Mr. Whittaker," he growled.

Whit let go of the boy's arm. "What are you doing?"

"This dumb machine made me lose!" He kicked it again.

Whit pulled the boy away from the game. "That's no reason to kick it! It's not your property!"

"Oh, that's all right!" Blackgaard almost sang. "He's just venting his feelings, that's all. You go right ahead and kick it, Nathan."

The boy scowled at the machine, glanced at Whit's stern face, and replied, "Uh—no thanks. I'll play with somethin' else." He turned and ran off.

"As you wish!" Blackgaard called after him. He turned back to Whit and Eugene with a superior look. "You see, Mr. Whittaker, he feels good about himself because he just had a very healthy release of emotion."

Eugene eyed the scuff marks on the front panel of the Zappazoids game. "His 'healthy release of emotion' damaged the front of your machine."

Whit scowled. "Don't you teach respect for other people's property here, Dr. Blackgaard?"

"Yes, but not at the expense of self-esteem," Blackgaard said patiently, as though he were explaining things to a child. "If he'd broken it, Richard would've fixed it. That's why I hired him. I designed this place for children's *enjoyment*, Mr. Whittaker. Pure, uninhibited fun is what we teach here."

Whit pointed across the room. "Like Madam Ouga's Astrological Forecaster?"

Blackgaard blinked. "Oh, I take it you don't approve of that either?"

"Do you really think it's wise to present the occult as a plaything?" Whit said scornfully.

"The *occult*!?" Blackgaard chortled. "Oh, come now! Aren't you overreacting just a bit? You know as well as I do that the so-called 'fortunes' Madam Ouga spits out are made up by a writer in a warehouse somewhere. It's just a harmless little machine—"

And right then, another ruckus flared up, directly in front of Madam Ouga. Nathan and Jeremy, another former regular at Whit's End, were in a shouting match that was quickly progressing to a shoving match.

"Hey, I'm still having *my* fortune told!"

"Get outta here! You've been hogging it ever since we came in!"

Whit glared at Blackgaard. "Harmless, huh?" He and Eugene rushed toward the boys.

"There's no cause for concern . . ." Blackgaard cooed and slowly followed them.

The two combatants were now entangled on the floor, while a small crowd around them chanted, "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Whit and Eugene waded into the thick of it. Eugene wrestled with Jeremy. "Cease and desist at once!"

And Whit collared Nathan. "C'mon, you two! Break it up! Break . . . it . . . up!"

The boys finally stopped struggling and the crowd quieted down just as Blackgaard approached, looking as though he were on a nice springtime stroll. "All right, now," he purred, "what seems to be the problem?"

Both boys started in again, talking over each other.

"I was trying to get my fortune told—"

"He's been hogging it all afternoon—"

"He shoved me outta the way!"

They lunged for each other, and Whit and Eugene pulled them apart again.

"That's enough!" Whit snapped. "Stop it!" He glowered at both boys and they slunk back.

"You two know you shouldn't be fighting!" Eugene scolded. "You don't fight at Whit's End!"

"This isn't Whit's End!" Jeremy sneered.

"Yeah!" Nathan snorted. "All you got there is the Train Room and the Bible Room . . ." There was an uncomfortable pause. Nathan lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry, Mr. Whittaker. I—I didn't mean it that way."

No one said anything for a long moment. Then Blackgaard chimed in. "Well, it's all over—no harm done! But it appears we've lost our happy mood. That won't do at all!" He raised his head and called out, "Free ice cream for everyone!"

The kids cheered and raced to the counter. Nathan and Jeremy wrencheded themselves free from Whit and Eugene and joined the mob there, where a middle-aged, unshaven, harried-looking soda jerk in a stained white shirt, sweaty paper hat, and spotty apron grimaced and then began dishing out scoops of ice cream for everyone.

Blackgaard smiled. "That's how to break up a fight, eh, Mr. Whittaker? Would you both care to join us?"

"No, thank you," Whit growled quietly. "We really must be going."

"So soon?" Blackgaard said with mock sincerity. "Well, it was a genuine pleasure having you here. I do hope you'll come again—and next time, Eustace, bring Connie with you."

"It's Eugene, and, uh, we'll try."

"Good. I trust you can let yourselves out? I have some business to attend to." Blackgaard nodded to them. "Gentlemen . . ." He glided away from them.

They turned and headed toward the front doors. Neither spoke. At the exit, Whit stopped, cast a sad look back at the room, sighed heavily, and shook his head. Eugene eyed him apprehensively. "I wouldn't be concerned about what those boys said, Mr. Whittaker."

Whit glanced at him. "Hm? Oh, I'm not, Eugene. I expect them to act that way—and worse—in a place like this. No, what really concerns me is Lucy."

Eugene nodded. "Indeed. Her infatuation with Richard Maxwell is definitely cause for alarm. Oh, allow me to get the door for you." He opened it, they stepped outside, and the door slowly swung shut, muting the mind-numbing chaos inside. Eugene lowered his own volume accordingly. "I've tried to speak to her about it—tell her what Richard did to Nicholas Adamsworth at the college—but whenever I've had the opportunity, I can't seem to find the words."

"I've been meaning to talk to her myself. I still haven't found out why she deceived Connie and me—although now I suspect Maxwell had something to do with it," he said thoughtfully. After a second, he shook away his concerned expression. "Well, I, for one, am certainly glad to be out of that madhouse!" He jerked his head toward the doors.

"Agreed!" Eugene responded enthusiastically. "I never thought I'd prefer the sound of traffic to the din of children."

Whit looked up at the blue sky and took a deep breath. "It's such a nice day! Hey, instead of taking the bus, let's *walk* back to Whit's End!"

Eugene's eyes widened. "Are you *sure*, Mr. Whittaker? It is quite a distance for a man of your—"

"Careful."

"—social position."

Whit chuckled. "Eugene, just do your best to keep up!"

CHAPTER THREE



“Okay, the coast is clear!”

Richard Maxwell peered out from behind the photo booth in Blackgaard’s Castle. The front doors had just closed behind Whittaker and Eugene, and Blackgaard had headed off across the main room. Maxwell drew back the curtain, and Lucy emerged from the booth, looking very guilty. “I feel bad about hiding from them that way,” she said.

Maxwell chuckled and waved off her concern. “It’s no biggie. Besides if we hadn’t, you wouldn’t have gotten all these great pictures!” He handed her a strip of four photos of her in various goofy poses.

She giggled. “It was fun.”

He gave her a smile, but it faded quickly when she directed her gaze toward the pictures. He didn’t want to face Whittaker, either.

As Blackgaard had told Eugene, Maxwell had also kept himself quite busy in the months since his involvement with the Riley barn burning. He had used his computer skills to set up a network around Blackgaard’s Castle, and as Eugene noticed, to computerize all of the games and attractions. It was a massive effort; one that Maxwell threw himself into, mainly to distract himself from what had happened at the barn.

When his guilt about his actions seeped in, he eased it by reminding himself that the barn burning accomplished the goal of keeping Riley from the vote, which pleased Blackgaard. And, anyway, burning down the barn hadn't been intentional.

When his guilt about his cowardice in not helping Riley or the horses persisted and pressed in on him, he chased it away by muttering forcefully, "No one got seriously hurt!" He then plunged into writing a particularly complex piece of programming code. And when even *that* didn't work, he forced his mind to repeat, almost mantra-like, that he had to do what he did to shield Connie from being corrupted by Blackgaard. He had convinced himself that Blackgaard was lying when he said he didn't want to hire Connie. Well, now she was back at Whit's End, thanks to him, and Blackgaard couldn't touch her. Mission accomplished; he had protected her.

And he would have to protect Lucy as well. She had been at Blackgaard's Castle every day since the grand opening, and even quite a bit before it, under the pretense that she was thinking about becoming a reporter for her school newspaper and wanted to break in by writing articles about Odyssey's newest entertainment attraction for kids.

Maxwell knew, though, that all of that was just an excuse for her to hang around with *him*. He didn't mind; he liked the adulation. She reminded him of his sister during their better times, and her attentions also helped to distract him from his nagging conscience—at least for a little while.

The problem was, since Maxwell's success in getting her to distract Whittaker from the town council vote, Blackgaard had been pressuring him to use her crush on him to get information about Whittaker and everything going on at Whit's End, including the Applesauce program. Maxwell had gathered a bit of information about it from her, but he knew it wouldn't be enough to satisfy his boss, and it would just be a matter of time before Blackgaard would start dealing with Lucy directly.

They headed to the soda counter. The rush of kids wanting free ice cream had thinned out. Maxwell helped Lucy onto an empty stool at the far end of the counter and then hopped on one next to her. He signaled to the soda jerk and called out, "Hey, Joe! Set up a round of sodas!" and pointed to the counter in front of them.

Joe scowled and grunted.

"I really shouldn't, Richard," Lucy said, looking guilty again. "I've already had two."

He again waved off her concern. "Ah, live it up! It's on the house!"

Lucy grinned. "Well . . . all right."

Joe set down their sodas, grunted again, and went back to the other end of the counter.

Lucy sipped her soda, while Maxwell took a large swig from his glass. "Ahhh!" *Time to press a little.* "So I take it from the way you hid from Mr. Whittaker and Eugene that you haven't been back to Whit's End lately."

She swallowed her sip and looked at the counter. "No, I have, a little. It's kind of uncomfortable now that Connie is back."

He nodded sympathetically. "I understand . . . it's just that . . ."

She glanced up at him. "What?"

He swiveled his stool so he could lean forward on his elbows. "Well . . . I was wondering if you'd made any progress on our little information-gathering project." He lifted his cup and took another swig.

Now she turned and faced the counter. "Oh . . . that." She took a deep breath.

He turned back to her. "Did you find out more about Applesauce—or anything?"

She shook her head. "No, not really. It's kind of difficult to bring up. And besides, I have a funny feeling about doing that—like I'm spying or something. I—I just don't feel right about it."

He touched her arm gently. "You're so considerate! Listen, you're not doing anything wrong. All you're doing is asking about stuff. No harm in that." He smiled at her. "You said you wanted to be a reporter; isn't that what a reporter does—gather information?"

Her face flushed at his touch and smile. "Well, yeah, but . . . I—I don't know."

"You'd be doing me a big favor. Will you at least try?" *Press a little harder.* "You don't want me to get fired, do ya?"

She looked at him, alarmed. "Fired? No! But I—I just . . . need to think about it . . . okay?"

He nodded. *It's no good. She's not giving in.* He admired her for it. She was stronger than she looked—stronger than *he* was.

Fortunately, he had another ace up his sleeve, one he had just completed that morning. It would let him keep control of the situation, and both protect Lucy and give Blackgaard what he wanted. He glanced up. *Speak of the devil.*

His boss was headed directly for them. "Richard," he called as he approached. "You—oh, hello, Lucy."

"Hi, Dr. Blackgaard."

Blackgaard eyed the empty glasses on the counter and a raised an eyebrow. "I see you're enjoying *another* soda."

Maxwell stood uncomfortably. "Yeah, uh, listen, Lucy, I really need to talk to the doctor."

She nodded. "I have to go anyway."

He helped her off her stool and put a hand on her shoulder. "Think about what I said, okay?"

She glanced at Blackgaard. "Yeah . . . I will." She turned and headed for the front doors.

"Good-bye, Lucy," Blackgaard called after her.

She looked back and waved. "Bye."

Maxwell returned her wave as she exited through the doors.

Blackgaard immediately pointed his finger at Maxwell and growled forcefully, "You. Office. Now!"

CHAPTER FOUR



Maxwell followed Blackgaard through the raucous main room to the door marked "Private." Blackgaard pulled the door open, impatiently gestured for Maxwell to step inside, and then closed the door behind them. The noise level dropped considerably. Blackgaard preceded Maxwell down the metal stairs. As they went, both their steps and voices echoed off the bare walls.

"I take it you two had a nice talk?" Blackgaard said.

"Yeah, we did."

"What did you find out?"

"You mean about Applesauce?"

Blackgaard reached the bottom of the staircase and whirled on Maxwell. "No, I mean about the price of soda syrup," he sneered. "Of course I mean about Applesauce!" He turned and navigated his way around stacks of boxes down the dank hallway. "What did she tell you?"

Maxwell hopped down the remaining steps and scurried to catch up. "Well, she said she heard some of the kids talkin' about how the gadgets in Whittaker's place went nuts and shut down a couple of months ago."

"Go on."

“She said they heard it shut down because of a program run by a big computer hidden somewhere in Whittaker’s office . . . and that the program runs *everything* at Whit’s End.”

“And?”

“And . . . Whittaker *really* wants it kept secret.”

They stopped outside the office door and Blackgaard glared at him. “Is that all?”

Maxwell held up his hands. “Don’tcha get it? If Whittaker wants the program kept secret *that* badly, then he must be tryin’ to hide somethin’ *really* big!”

Blackgaard grimaced. “Of course he’s trying to hide something really big, you dolt! He’s trying to hide Applesauce! We’ve known that for weeks!”

Inwardly, Maxwell was roaring with laughter. *I love yanking your chain, you pompous windbag.* He looked at Blackgaard defensively. “We didn’t know it; we just *thought* it. Now, we’re sure.”

“That’s *all* you have for me?”

Maxwell shrugged. “Well, Lucy’s gonna check around some more . . .”

Blackgaard growled, exasperated. “Richard, I’ve given that girl free food, free games—the complete run of this place. You said she even has a crush on you.”

“She does.” He smirked.

“Then why haven’t you extracted more information from her?”

Maxwell held up his hands. “Hey, it takes time, you know? If I move too fast, I’ll scare her away.”

“I don’t care about scaring her!” He leaned forward and poked a finger in Maxwell’s chest. “*I . . . want . . . Applesauce!*”

Maxwell turned his palms toward his boss. “We’ll get it, we’ll get it . . . Lucy’s not the only way to get information, you know.”

Blackgaard straightened, his eyes widening. “Then you *do* have something else?”

Maxwell’s eyes wandered around the hallway. “Maybe.”

“What is it?!” Blackgaard hissed.

“Ask me nicely,” Maxwell said coyly.

Blackgaard’s face grew dark. He inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly, and then growled again. “Richard, I’m in no mood for guessing games—*what is it?*”

Maxwell knew he had pushed it as far as he dared. “All right, all right! I thought you had a sense of humor . . . Remember how I told you that to get into Whittaker’s computer I needed my own dedicated computer with Internet access?”

Blackgaard scowled. “Of course I remember! It has been sitting on my desk in boxes for the past two months while you’ve been doing who knows what around here and wasting time with that girl!”

Maxwell bristled. “Hey, I haven’t been wasting anything! Setting up a state-of-the-art computer network takes time, if you’re gonna do it right!”

“And *have* you?”

Maxwell smiled. “The question of the hour. And for an answer . . .” He opened the office door. “*Voila!*” He pointed to the desk. Instead of boxes, a gleaming black computer monitor and keyboard sat on the desk, and a dull silver computer tower was next to it. Wires ran from the back of the computer to other gadgets sitting on a shelf behind the desk. “I just finished this morning. It’s all hooked up and ready to connect.”

Blackgaard entered the office and examined the computer components carefully. He turned back to Maxwell and chuckled delightedly. “Oh, Richard! I knew you’d come through! By all means —connect!”

Maxwell strode into the room and slid into the desk chair in front of the computer. “Your wish is my command, Oh great one!” He began rapidly punching keys on the computer keyboard. Characters and algorithms appeared on the monitor, and suddenly, there was a

loud *blip*, and the screen changed completely. A menu appeared, and through the computer's speakers, a computerized female voice said, "Hello, John Avery Whittaker."

Maxwell laughed. "Ha! It talks!"

Blackgaard's eyes widened. "Interesting."

"It must have artificial intelligence. I don't have any way of talking back to it, though."

"You mean, we can hear it, but it can't hear us?"

Maxwell nodded. "Yeah—but I can type in what we need . . ." His fingers flew over the keyboard. "Load . . . program . . . menu . . ."

Blip. Whir. The screen changed again. "Program menu on screen," said the voice.

Blackgaard leaned in eagerly.

Maxwell could barely sit still. "This is great!" He read the words on the screen. "Train Room . . . Noah's Ark . . . Imagination Station —"

Blackgaard pointed and barked. "There! Applesauce!"

"I see it, I see it—ready for the picking!" Maxwell licked his lips and typed, "Download Applesauce."

The computer buzzed unpleasantly, and the voice said, "Action not authorized. Please contact administrator."

Blackgaard looked confused. "What does that mean?"

Maxwell huffed. "It means Whittaker is smarter than we thought. Only an administrator—namely, him—can download the program."

Blackgaard growled. "Blast!"

Maxwell thought for a moment. "Hang on, now. Just because we can't download it doesn't mean we can't . . ." He began typing again.

"What?" Blackgaard hissed. "Can't what?!"

The computer voice intoned, "Loading Applesauce program . . ." It began whirring softly. *Blip!* "Applesauce program is loaded. Please push any key to continue."

"It's working!" Maxwell marveled.

Blackgaard grasped his shoulder. "Wonderful!"

Maxwell leaned back a bit from the desk and turned to Blackgaard, gesturing to the computer. “Be my guest.”

Blackgaard grinned from ear to ear. “Why, thank you, Richard.” He hovered his index finger over the keyboard for a second, then jabbed the letter *B*.

Blip! “Applesauce level one. Internal matrix for Whit’s End is loaded. Systems check is beginning . . .”

Maxwell laughed again. “Ha! Systems check!”

Blackgaard looked pleased but puzzled. “What’s that? What’s happening?”

“It’s running a systems check!” Maxwell replied joyfully. “That means everything is going crazy at Whit’s End!”



And so it was. Every display, machine, and invention at Whit’s End seemed to be going nuts—as was the human currently in charge of it all. “Aaaah! What’s happening!?” Connie yelled.

The entire place erupted in a dissonance of clanking, honking, buzzing, ringing, whirring, knocking, pinging, and revving. “Oh, no! Oh, no! That crazy computer!” she screamed. “Not again! Aaahhh!”

Her scream was joined by the screams of the few kids in the building. Connie turned to them and bellowed, “Everybody—get out! Now! Move!” They all raced for the front door.



Blackgaard and Maxwell roared with delighted laughter. “I’d love to be a fly on the wall there right now!” Maxwell croaked, wiping tears from his eyes.

Blackgaard clapped his hands like a child at the circus.

A sudden *blip* from the computer speakers hushed them both. “Systems check complete,” said the computer voice.

Blackgaard and Maxwell both leaned toward the screen again. “What happens next?” asked the doctor.

“I don’t know,” whispered Maxwell.

Blip, whir, blip! “Applesauce proceeding to level two.”

Maxwell’s eyes widened. “Level two?”

Whir. “Please enter password.”

“Uh-oh.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Blackgaard.

Maxwell pointed to the screen. “It wants a password!”

Whir. “Please enter password.”

“Then give it one!” yelled Blackgaard.

Maxwell held up his hands. “I don’t know what the right one is!”

Whir, blip! “You have ten seconds to enter password.” A steady blipping began, deep and evenly paced, that got progressively louder. At the same time, the computer voice started a countdown.

Blip! “Ten.” *Blip!* “Nine.” *Blip!* “Eight.”

“What happens if you don’t give it one?” asked Blackgaard over the blips.

“It’ll probably shut everything down like it did before!”

Blip! “Seven.” *Blip!* “Six.”

“Good!” Blackgaard smirked.

“No, not good!” said Maxwell. “If it shuts down while we’re in it, they might be able to trace it back to us!”

Blip! “Five.” *Blip!* “Four.”

“Then get out of it—quickly!” Blackgaard shouted.

Maxwell lurched at the keypad. “I’ll have to break the connection!”

Blip! “Three.” *Blip!* “Two.”

“Do it!” Blackgaard roared.

Blip! “One.”

Maxwell smashed the proper keys and the blips stopped. The room was very still. The only sound was their breathing and the very faint and distant hullabaloo of the kids upstairs. Suddenly Blackgaard

pounded a fist onto the desk, and Maxwell jumped and screamed. “Nyaah!”

“Blast Whittaker and his safeguards!” Blackgaard snarled. He began pacing around the room.

Maxwell swallowed hard. “Well, sure. I mean, the guy’s no dope.”

“No,” Blackgaard grunted, then stopped and faced Maxwell. “Richard, we must get that password!”

CHAPTER FIVE



About ten minutes later, Whit strode down the walkway leading through McAlister Park to Whit's End. He glanced behind him and saw Eugene several yards back, huffing and puffing, holding his side. Whit called out, “C'mon, Eugene! Just a few more steps and we're there!”

“Mr. Whittaker . . . if you . . . could just . . . slow down . . .”

Whit quickened his last few strides and bounded up the front porch steps of the discovery emporium. He took a deep breath and turned back to Eugene, who staggered to the bottom of the steps and grabbed the railing for support, gasping for breath. Whit smiled. “Here we are! Not bad for a man of my ‘social standing,’ eh?”

Eugene shook his head, his shaggy hair damp with sweat. “No . . .” he replied, sucking in air. “Not . . . bad . . . at all . . .”

Whit chuckled. “C'mon—I'll get you something to drink.” Eugene stumbled up the steps and joined his boss. Whit opened the door, and the little bell tinkled as they stepped inside. It was the only noise in the entire place.

Whit's End was as dead as a mausoleum.

Whit and Eugene crept into the darkened soda fountain. Eugene's jaw dropped. “Oh, my! Everything's off!”

Whit called out. "Connie? Connie!" His voice echoed around the deserted room.

Connie's voice responded from the kitchen. "Whit!" She burst through the door and ran up to him, hair disheveled, eyes wide as saucers, face white as a sheet. "Oh, Whit!"

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." She nodded. "But it happened just like it did before! Everything started goin' bonkers, then it got crazier and crazier, and then it all shut down—kaput!"

Eugene frowned. "Applesauce again?"

Connie held up her hands. "I didn't touch it! I promise you I didn't touch it! I didn't even go upstairs except to get everybody out of the building when it started goin' nuts!"

Whit put his hands on her shoulders. "Calm down, Connie. I believe you." He gave her a reassuring smile, and the color started returning to her face.

She heaved a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Whit."

He gave her shoulders a quick squeeze and then stepped back and took a look around, brow furrowed. "So why would this happen?"

Eugene scratched his head. "Could we have a malfunction somewhere?"

Whit's eyebrows raised, and he cocked his head. "I guess we'd better find out. C'mon, Eugene."

They crossed to the stairs and quickly ascended them, as Connie sank into a nearby chair. "Oh, brother!" she sighed, leaning back. "What *next*?"



That afternoon, the bell above the front door at Whit's End tinkled softly as Lucy entered. The building was still dark and deserted. She inched forward and called out tentatively, "H-hello?"

After a second Connie burst forth from the kitchen, calling out, "Who's there?" Her eyes widened. "Lucy!" She made her way around the counter as Lucy moved farther into the soda fountain area.

"Hi, Connie," she said a bit stiffly as she looked around. "What happened to this place?"

Connie shrugged and motioned upstairs. "That's what Whit and Eugene are trying to figure out." There was an awkward pause. "So, what are you up to?"

"I came to see Mr. Whittaker," Lucy replied guardedly. "I have something I need to talk to him about, but if he's busy . . ." She glanced back at the front door.

"Well, he is . . . kinda," Connie said apologetically. "But I'm sure he'll talk to you if—"

"No," Lucy cut in. "That's all right. I'll come back later." She turned to leave.

Connie piped up again. "You could always talk to *me*." Lucy stopped, and Connie took a step toward her. "We used to talk a lot," she said sadly.

Lucy nodded slowly. "Yeah . . . but things are different now . . . Richard says—" She stopped herself and sighed. "Oh, never mind." She started to leave again.

"Wait," Connie pleaded. Lucy stopped but didn't face her. "Richard . . . Maxwell?"

"Yes."

"Oh. You've been seeing a lot of him lately?"

Lucy finally turned and gazed straight into Connie's eyes. "Yeah, I guess I have."

Connie took a deep breath. "Lucy," she said sincerely, "it's probably none of my business, but do you think it's a good idea for you to spend so much time with Richard?"

Lucy stiffened. "Why not? I like him, and he's nice to me." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Nicer than a lot of people . . ."

Connie ignored the slight, though she couldn't deny it hurt. She took a step closer. "But he's . . . well, he doesn't have a very good reputation, and he's older than you are by quite a bit, and . . . and I don't think he can be trusted. I'm afraid he'll hurt you."

A pause. Lucy's gaze never wavered but stayed locked on Connie's eyes. Her mouth tightened, and she took several breaths in through her nose. Connie thought Lucy might burst into tears. Instead she finally relaxed her mouth, licked her lips quickly, and spoke in a cold, controlled, low voice. "Maybe you're right, Connie."

Connie blinked. *Have I actually gotten through to her? "I am?"*

"Yeah," Lucy said curtly, "it *is* none of your business." She spun on her heel and made a beeline for the front door.

Connie was taken aback, but still managed to call after her. "Lucy—Lucy!" But it was too late. The bell tinkled, the door slammed, and Lucy was gone. Connie sighed heavily. "Way to go, Connie," she muttered to herself.



Outside, Lucy stormed away from Whit's End and into the park, furious thoughts boiling in her head. *How dare Connie butt into my business?! She always treats me like I'm a little baby—like I can't take care of myself or even know my own mind! Everyone treats me that way!*

Everyone but Richard.

She sighed. *He just wants me to spy on Mr. Whittaker and Whit's End. But at least he treats me like an adult.*

She came to a bench and plopped down on it. She knew Connie was just acting out of concern for her, but who asked her to? She didn't need Connie's concern or anybody else's. *Everyone is always making decisions for me . . . Well, I'm old enough to make my own decisions!* Okay, so she snuck out of her cabin after hours at Camp

What-A-Nut—*Oh, my! Call the police! Alert the National Guard!*
Honestly, what was the big deal? Nobody got hurt. I was just trying to have a little fun—isn't that what camp is supposed to be all about?

Not to Connie, apparently; her camp was all about following rules, no matter how dumb they were. But Connie *didn't* follow the rules, and nothing really happened to her! Oh, sure, she was fired, but then she went to camp, and now she's right back working at the place where she broke the rules! “And all thanks to *me!*” she muttered. “I made it happen for her!”

Lucy shifted uncomfortably on the bench. Okay, maybe she had to tell a couple of small lies to *make* it happen, but look at the good that resulted! It was just like Richard said—Connie was right back where she wanted most in the world to be. *She should be thanking me—and Richard—but instead she's questioning our friendship!*

Just like Richard said, she thought again. She had done what he had asked before, and he had been right—Connie was back at Whit's End. And since *that* had all worked out fine, then helping him out by getting him information about Applesauce and Whit's End would work out, too, right? At least, it wouldn't really *hurt* anything . . . would it? Besides, Richard had been right about something else—she *did* want to be a reporter, and reporters *do* gather information for their stories. And something told her this was a really good story.

A tingle went down her spine.

Almost without realizing it, she rose from the bench and headed back to Whit's End. She knew she couldn't go in through the front door—the little bell would give her away. She had never entered through the back door before. She decided if it was locked that would be a sign she shouldn't do this. She crept across the small parking lot and up to the door.

It was wide open.

She took a deep breath and swallowed hard. *This is what reporters do*, she thought and then slipped inside.

She was in a small hallway that led to a storage area just off the kitchen. It was a lot bigger than she thought it would be, but then again, that seemed to be the case with a lot of the rooms in this building. She sneaked past the prep tables, stove, and sinks to the swinging door behind the counter in the main soda fountain area. Lucy paused there and listened intently—all was quiet. She inched the door open to see if Connie was behind the counter. It was clear. She squeezed through the space and stayed low. Her heart was pounding so hard she was sure anyone in the room could have heard it.

She crept along the counter, and at its end, peered around it. The main room was empty. She took another deep breath and then raced to the stairs and climbed them as noiselessly as she could.

At the top, she heard voices—Connie and Eugene talking to each other loudly from different rooms. At the opposite end of the building were other rooms; she recognized one of them as Mr. Whittaker's office. Its door was also wide open.

She tiptoed to it and stopped—there was movement inside, and someone was humming. It was Mr. Whittaker.

His presence made her balk. She was spying on Mr. Whittaker! This couldn't be right! She almost turned and left right then, but then she heard a click, what sounded like a heavy door opening, and then the hum of machines. Was there another room inside of Mr. Whittaker's office? Curiosity got the better of her and she scooted inside.

Sure enough, there was another room, behind the bookcase, filled with equipment. Mr. Whittaker stood at a computer terminal and said, "Hello, Mabel."

The computer answered, "Hello, John Avery Whittaker."

"Mabel, please run a self diagnostic; password: 5JKingProv04."

"Password accepted. Estimated run time for diagnostic: twenty-five minutes."

"Begin."

Mabel began to whir, and lights on the consoles started blinking in a weird sort of rhythm. Lucy was momentarily mesmerized, until Eugene's voice called out from down the hall, "Mr. Whittaker?" She quickly ducked behind the desk. Eugene entered the office as Mr. Whittaker emerged from the computer room. "What is it, Eugene?"

"I found nothing amiss with our outside electrical source. And the power company says there have been no shutdowns in this area."

"Then the problem is internal."

Eugene nodded. "It sounds very much like Applesauce, but Miss Kendall insists she didn't use it."

Lucy's eyes widened. *Applesauce could cause this?*

"I believe her, Eugene," Mr. Whittaker replied. "I have Mabel running a self-diagnostic. Once it's complete, we'll power back up and check out everything. Meanwhile, we have a great deal of ice cream downstairs getting softer and softer. Let's get the backup generator running to at least keep the freezer operating."

"Indeed." They pushed the bookshelf back in place and left the room.

Lucy's mind raced trying to comprehend all she had just discovered. Though she knew about Applesauce, she had no idea it was on a huge computer named Mabel in a secret room hidden behind a bookshelf in Mr. Whittaker's office at Whit's End. And she now knew the password for it! Was this really something she should tell Richard?

And then she heard it. Connie's voice.

Lucy rose from behind the desk, moved to the office door, and peered out into the hallway. Eugene and Mr. Whittaker were at the top of the stairs, and Connie was bounding down the hall to join them. Mr. Whittaker told her about the generator, and they all descended the stairs together, Connie talking the whole way down.

Her irritating voice was all Lucy needed. She *would* tell Richard what she had discovered. *Immediately.* She crept to the stairs, waited until the three of them had exited into the kitchen, and then

bolted down the staircase. She made a beeline to the front door, opened it carefully to keep the bell from tinkling, stepped outside, closed it just as carefully, and raced to the bus stop.

CHAPTER SIX



The bus rolled to a halt, and Lucy rose and hopped off. It sped away in a cloud of diesel fumes, which she fanned from her face as she walked across the parking lot to Blackgaard's Castle. There were considerably fewer bikes in the racks out front, which was understandable as it was getting late in the afternoon and kids were heading home for supper.

She opened the doors and went inside. The main room was much quieter now. She made her way to the soda fountain where Joe was leaning on his elbow, bulgy eyes half-closed, chewing on a toothpick.

“Hi, Joe.”

His eyes snapped open. “Huh? Oh, hi, Lucy. I suppose you wanna ‘nudder drink?”

“No, thank you. Have you seen Richard? I need to talk to him.”

Joe nodded toward the “Private” door. “He’s downstairs in Blackgaard’s office.”

“Thanks.” She smiled and headed in that direction. Joe went back to leaning and chewing, and then his gravelly voice wafted after her, “I don’t think they wanna be distoibed though . . .”

Lucy reached the door, hesitated, and then opened it and slipped inside. She glided noiselessly down the stairs and maneuvered around the boxes. “I wish they’d put some lights in this hallway and clean out some of this stuff,” she murmured.

She reached the office door and was just about to knock when she heard Blackgaard’s muffled voice rise from behind it. “I must get Applesauce!”

Applesauce? She leaned closer to the door.

“Now think, Richard—think! What could the password be?”

“Passwords. There may be more than one, and they could be anything—any word or even random combinations of letters and numbers!” came Richard’s muffled reply. “The way Whittaker’s got it set up, we could try for a hundred years and never hack into it.”

Her eyes widened. *Hack?! That’s stealing!*

“That’s not good enough, Richard,” Blackgaard said.

A desk chair squeaked. “Wait a minute,” Richard said. “There’s something I don’t understand here.”

“What?”

Footsteps—Richard moved around the desk. “Why? *Why* do we need the passwords? I mean, I know you wanna download Applesauce, but you’ve got everything you need right here in level one to control Whit’s End. What do you want with the rest of the program?”

“*That—*” Blackgaard barked, and Lucy flinched. Then Blackgaard continued more calmly, “—is *my* business . . . and I’ll thank you to keep your nose out of it.” Heavier footsteps—Blackgaard moved away from Richard and then stopped. “Lucy!”

She jumped at her name, and then heard Maxwell stutter, “W-w-what about her?”

“You’re going to have to put more pressure on her! Make her find out what the password is.”

Lucy gasped softly and slapped her hand over her mouth.

“Look,” Richard replied, “I think I’ve already squeezed as much information out of her as I’m gonna get. I mean there’s only so much that free soda and ice cream can buy, you know?”

Lucy’s heart dropped into her stomach. *Buy?*

“You underestimate yourself, Richard,” Blackgaard said smoothly. “I’ve seen the way you charm that girl—just like you’ve charmed dozens of others, no doubt, yes?”

“Well . . . sure, but—”

“You can make her do just about anything you want.”

Her face scrunched in pain, she squeezed her eyes shut, and tiny tears escaped through her lids and trickled down her cheeks. She inwardly berated herself. *Oh, Lucy! How could you have been so stupid! Connie was right—Richard’s been using you, and now he’s trying to hack into Mr. Whittaker’s computer! And you were about to help him!* She took a deep breath, steeled herself, opened her eyes, and leaned back on the door.

“She’s the key, Richard,” Blackgaard continued. “You need to get Lucy to get the password for us. She can get Applesauce!”

“But you don’t understand!” Richard protested.

She never noticed before how whiny Richard’s voice was—or how vicious Blackgaard’s could be.

“Don’t argue with me!” he snapped. “Whatever it takes, just *do it!* I want that program, do you hear? And I’ll *have it*—if I have to tear down Whit’s End brick by brick!”

Lucy straightened up. She’d heard enough. *I have to warn Mr. Whittaker!* She backed away, but as she turned, she tripped over her own foot and tumbled into a short stack of boxes. To her surprise they were empty, and they toppled over with a dull thump.

She gasped and heard Maxwell say, “What was that?” She raced down the hallway, ducking behind another stack just as the office door opened and Blackgaard and Maxwell stepped out.

“I don’t know,” said Blackgaard. He called out, “Who is it? Who’s there?”

Lucy froze. The two men crept down the hallway toward her.

"Come on out now, whoever you are . . ." cooed Blackgaard. "We won't hurt you . . ." They stole forward, peering behind each stack of boxes as they went.

Lucy crouched up against the wall and held her breath. They were right on the other side of the stack she hid behind now and just about to peer around it when a cat meowed loudly behind them. They both turned.

"Sasha!" Blackgaard crooned. He and Maxwell headed back toward the cat and the office. "You naughty cat!" Blackgaard scolded, picking her up. "You come into the office—you'll get hurt out here!" They went inside. "Close the door, Richard."

Maxwell peered down the hallway one last time and then pushed the door shut.

Lucy heaved a quiet sigh of relief. She put one hand on her chest and the other on the wall to help push herself to her feet. When she did so, her fingers slipped into the gap between the wall and the stack of boxes, and she felt something odd. There was a small gap in the wall itself. She ran her fingers along it; it went from the floor to just before the top of the stack. Lucy checked to see if these boxes were empty, but they were all full. She carefully and quietly scooted them a few inches from the wall. The gap turned at a right angle at the top of the stack.

Exploring further, she saw that the thin gaps were actually the outline of a door. The boxes were no doubt placed there to hide it. She tried pushing the door open, but it wouldn't give way. *Probably opens out into the hall*, she thought. She was suddenly very curious to know what the door concealed, but she heard the men's muffled voices from the office again, and she knew she couldn't risk it. "Besides, I've got to get to Mr. Whittaker!" she whispered.

She carefully and quietly pushed the boxes back into place, dashed down the hallway, up the stairs, through the now nearly empty main room, past a snoozing Joe, and out of the building.

CHAPTER Seven



Blackgaard stroked Sasha gently as he paced around the office.

Maxwell was grateful the cat had a calming effect on his boss's temper. He sat on the edge of the desk and said reasonably, "Look, getting the password is just gonna take a little more time, that's all."

Blackgaard seemed lost in Sasha's purring. "Yes," he said thoughtfully, "time . . ." Suddenly, he turned to Maxwell and pointed at the computer. "Connect to Whittaker's computer again!"

Maxwell bolted up and moved around the desk to the keyboard. "Okay . . . what are you gonna do?"

Blackgaard smiled. "Buy us some time." He scratched the cat's head. "Isn't that right, Sasha?"

She meowed and purred.



"There, that should do it." Whit finished typing on Mabel's keyboard. He hit the "Enter" key and stepped outside to his office door. Throughout the building, he heard and saw the systems powering back up. Connie let out a loud whoop of joy from downstairs, and he chuckled. He reentered his office and shut the bookcase door to the computer room.

Eugene appeared in his office doorway. "Mr. Whittaker?"

"Eugene."

"Did you discover anything?"

Whit replaced the bookcase key in the inside cover of *The Last Battle* by C. S. Lewis and set the book back on the shelf. "No, I've powered everything back up again, and Mabel seems to be all right. She just shut the place down for some reason."

Eugene stroked his chin. "Do you think it could be a holdover of some sort from the last time Applesauce was used?"

Whit shrugged. "It could be. The only way to find out is to run systems checks on each machine hooked up to the computer."

Eugene's face brightened. "That should be most enjoyable! Which shall we do first?"

Whit grinned at his enthusiasm. "Well, let's start with the closest—the Imagination Station." They headed down the hallway.

In the computer room, Mabel's screen had lit up again . . .



Maxwell typed rapidly. "Okay, we're in. I turned off the sound in case someone's over there."

Blackgaard nodded. "Good." He made his way around the desk, studied the monitor, and muttered, "I saw something here last time that I thought very . . ." His eyes brightened. "Ah! There it is!" He pointed to the screen. "'Power Drain.' What does that do?"

"Let's see." Maxwell began typing again. "Cool! It's a subroutine that controls power—turning it on and shutting it off . . . Oh! Very cool! It can do it for the whole building or a single machine! Really clever and useful if you want to work on one but keep all the others running."

"That's exactly what I want!" Blackgaard exclaimed. "Do it!"

Maxwell nodded. "Okay, but which machine?"

"That one the kids are always talking about," Blackgaard replied. "What's it called? Uh . . . the Imagination Station!"



Lucy shook her head. From Blackgaard's Castle to Whit's End, back to Blackgaard's Castle, and now back to Whit's End, all in one day. Must be some kind of record. Now she knew how a ping-pong ball felt. But this trip was the most important one. She made her way to the front of the bus. "Driver?"

The driver glanced back at her. "Please stay behind the yellow line, miss."

Lucy looked down. The toe of her right shoe was barely touching the line. She rolled her eyes but pulled it back. "Sorry. Do you think you could let me off in front of Whit's End?"

The driver shook his head. "No can do, miss. Rules are rules. I can only halt the bus at the duly appointed stops."

"But I'm in kind of a hurry!"

The driver pointed ahead. "My next stop'll put you about a half a block from Whit's End. Best I can do."

Lucy sighed and nodded. "Okay."



"Everything in the control booth seems to check out, Mr. Whittaker," Eugene said.

Whit nodded. "Yes, as though nothing went wrong—"

Suddenly all of the lights on the control panel blinked off, and the normal hum of the Imagination Station's circuits wound down.

Eugene blinked. "I don't believe it! Another power failure!" He poked his head out of the control room door.

Whit put his hands on his hips. "That's the strangest thing!"

"Stranger yet," said Eugene, "it's only happened to this one machine!"



“That’s it!” exclaimed Maxwell. “The program just drained all the power out of the Imagination Station!”

Blackgaard laughed. “Good! And now a final ‘thank you’ to our friend, Mr. Whittaker . . .” He studied the screen and pointed again. “Yes! That one, right there!”

“Power Boost.” Maxwell frowned. “Wait a minute. All the circuits in the Imagination Station are dead! If you send a sudden surge of power through them, no telling what it could do!”

Blackgaard smiled nonchalantly and stroked Sasha’s back. “Really?”

“B-but what if someone’s *in* there?”

“Do it!” Blackgaard spat.

“But—”

“Now, Richard!”

Maxwell sighed, exasperated. “All right, all right!” He began typing again.



The bell tinkled as the front door at Whit’s End burst open and Lucy ran in. “Mr. Whittaker!” she gasped.

Connie rushed to meet her. “Lucy! I’m so glad you came back . . . Look, about what I said earlier—”

Lucy inhaled deeply. “Never mind that! I have to warn Mr. Whittaker! Where is he?”

“Uh, upstairs! He and Eugene are working on the Imagination Station—”

Lucy bolted up the stairs two at a time, leaving behind a confused Connie.

“Wait a minute!” she called out. “Warn him about *what*?! Lucy!”



“What’s happening, Richard?” Blackgaard hissed viciously.

“I-it’s almost ready—when the bar reaches one hundred percent, you just hit ‘Enter.’”



Whit sighed. “Well, I don’t know what’s the matter with it. You stay here in the control booth, Eugene. I’m gonna check the station itself.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Whittaker.”



“How much longer?!”

“There!” Maxwell pointed. “One hundred percent!”

“Push ‘Enter,’” Blackgaard ordered.

“It’s not a good idea!”

“I said, *push it!*”

“Someone could get hurt!”

Blackgaard roared. “Arrrrgggh! You spineless . . . Get out of my way!” He shoved Maxwell out of the chair and dropped Sasha on the desk. She screeched in protest, leapt down, and took cover under the credenza across the room. Blackgaard was all but foaming at the mouth. “A little present for you, Mr. John Avery Whittaker!” He pounded the ‘Enter’ key.



Whit was examining the grid along the Imagination Station’s walls, floors, and ceiling when Lucy ran in. “Mr. Whittaker!”

“Lucy? What’s the matter?”

She put her hand against the wall and tried to catch her breath. “Something . . . terrible is . . . gonna happen!”

“What? What are you—”

Around them, a low whine started abruptly and increased in intensity rapidly. Eugene shouted from the control room, panicked. "Mr. Whittaker! Get out of there, quick! It's a power surge!"

The whine increased. Whit's eyes widened. "Power surge! Lucy, don't touch the wall!"

He lunged for her, and she looked up at him just as the room erupted in an explosion of electricity. Sparks flew everywhere. Bolts zapped the walls, floor, and ceiling. Lucy took a great jolt through her hand. She screamed as she was hurled backward. She bashed against the opposite wall and collapsed to the floor in a heap. Whit also crashed to the floor and bawled, "Lucyyyy!" before a bolt struck him and he lay motionless.

Everything fizzled out.

The station went dark.

All was still.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Eugene, Connie, and Whit sat quietly in the waiting area of Odyssey Memorial Hospital. It had just been Connie and Eugene for the longest time, but finally Whit emerged from a treatment room with his arm wrapped in a bandage and his hair looking a bit frizzy. He assured his employees that he was all right and joined them as they continued to sit in silent vigil, each lost in thought.

Finally, Connie stretched and sighed. "I wish someone would tell us something! How long have we been here, anyway?"

Eugene checked his watch. "Three hours, fifty-seven minutes, thirteen seconds," he said.

Connie squeezed Whit's hand. "How's your arm?"

"Fine, Connie. Just a little sore."

There was another long silence. They watched as several patients were wheeled in and out of rooms on gurneys. Connie took another deep breath and stood up. "Boy, do I wish someone would tell us something!" She surveyed the room. "Does anyone want anything from the cafeteria, a cup of coffee or—"

"Whit?"

They all turned. Dr. Farber was headed for them. Whit and Eugene also rose from their chairs as she approached. "Hello, Doctor," Whit said.

Dr. Farber spied the bandage. "How's the arm?"

"A little singed." Whit shrugged. "I've had much worse."

The doctor smiled. "I understand you've been waiting to hear about your friend Lucy?"

"Yes, we all have."

Dr. Farber consulted her chart. "Well, she's pretty banged up . . . a possible concussion and some nasty bruises. We're going to have to watch her closely. She's had quite a shock—literally."

"I know the feeling," Whit replied. "But . . . she'll be all right?"

The doctor nodded. "I think it's safe to say so, yes."

Connie heaved a sigh of relief and leaned against Eugene. "Oh, thank the Lord!"

Eugene pushed her back upright.

"Can we see her?" asked Whit.

"Not right now," Dr. Farber demurred. "Her parents are watching her. I gave her a sedative in Emergency. She needs all the rest she can get, and I'd like to keep it that way for a while."

"We understand. Thank you."

Dr. Farber took a breath. "That wasn't the only reason I came to talk with you—I also brought *you* a visitor." She turned back and called, "Uh, Sheriff?"

Eugene gulped. "Sheriff?"

"If you'll excuse me, I have other patients to attend to."

"Of course. Thanks again, Doctor."

Dr. Farber walked away as the sheriff approached. He tipped his hat. "Lo, Whit."

Whit nodded. "Bill."

The sheriff sighed. "I don't know how to say this, Whit, without comin' right out and sayin' it. We're gonna have to conduct an investigation into this incident."

“Investigation?!” Connie squawked. “It was an accident!”

Whit gave her a sideways glance. “Connie . . .” She backed off. He turned back to the sheriff. “I understand, Bill.”

“Well, you know what that means,” the sheriff said apologetically. “Now, it’ll just be temporary, until the investigation is over.” He pulled a paper from his back pocket. “I got a court order here—”

Connie and Eugene started at the sight of the order, but Whit continued before they could say anything. “Of course, Bill. I’ll cooperate with you fully. But you won’t need the court order. I was gonna close down Whit’s End myself anyway.”

This time, he couldn’t stop his employees’ outbursts.

“What?!”

“Mr. Whittaker!”

Whit held up his hand and that stopped them from saying any more, at least temporarily.

The sheriff nodded. “All right, Whit. We’ll work out the details in the morning.” He tipped his hat again. “G’night, all.” He turned and strolled away.

“Good night, Bill,” Whit called after him.

Connie and Eugene were on him almost immediately.

“Close it down?”

“But why?”

Whit frowned. “I’m conducting an investigation of my own. I have to make sure Whit’s End is safe.”

“But it was an accident, Whit!” Connie implored. “An accident!”

“I know, I know.” He looked them both in the eyes sincerely and with great affection, and then dropped his gaze to the floor. “Look . . . my place was designed and built to *help* kids. And now it’s done just the opposite. I have to make sure that doesn’t happen again.” He took a step back and looked up at them again. “I’m sorry, but until further notice, Whit’s End is closed.”

He turned and walked away.

They watched him go in stunned silence.

CHAPTER NINE



The following morning found Dr. Regis Blackgaard sitting at the desk in his office, eyes closed, leaning back in his executive leather chair, petting Sasha. They both appeared to be very serene, but their peace was shattered by Richard Maxwell, who came barreling down the hallway toward them.

“Blackgaard!” he shouted. “Dr. Blackgaard!”

Blackgaard opened his eyes, leaned forward, and called out, “There’s no need for shouting, Richard. I’m here in the office, as you well know.”

Maxwell appeared in the doorway, huffing and puffing, his face red and sweaty. He carried a copy of the *Odyssey Times* newspaper, which he shook at Blackgaard. “I want to talk to you!”

Blackgaard scratched Sasha behind the ears. She purred contentedly. “You seem distraught, Richard.”

Maxwell crossed to the desk opposite him. “I’m not distraught—I’m *mad!* Have you seen today’s newspaper?”

“No, I don’t believe so.” Blackgaard smiled benignly.

Maxwell slammed the newspaper on the desk—startling Sasha—and shoved it at Blackgaard. “Here . . . read it!”

Blackgaard glanced at it casually. "Oh! We're expecting rain tomorrow."

"Very funny!" Maxwell spat. "You know what I'm talking about!" He jabbed his finger at the headline. "That! Read it!"

Blackgaard remained unflappable and read aloud, "One of *Odyssey's Most Successful Businesses Under Investigation . . . Whit's End Closes After Child Injured in Invention.*" He smiled delightedly. "Well, what do you know! We made the front page! Above the fold, too! Congratulations—it appears we were successful!"

"Too successful!" Maxwell roared. "That injured child is *Lucy!* She's in the hospital!"

Blackgaard's face oozed sympathy. "Oh, Richard, I *am* sorry. That *is* distressing news. We must send our best wishes and some flowers to her room, as well. Does it say where she's staying?" He leaned over the paper again, and Maxwell jerked it out from under his face.

"That's *it*!?" he exploded. "That's all you have to say?"

"Yes," Blackgaard replied, gazing at him coolly.

Maxwell flung the paper across the room, scattering it everywhere. Sasha bolted from Blackgaard's lap to her spot under the credenza and peered out from it.

Maxwell began to pace back and forth furiously. "I can't believe this! We could've *killed* her!"

Blackgaard cocked his head to one side and scrutinized Maxwell, as though he were analyzing a patient. "Richard, I'm hearing something in your voice I don't quite believe: You don't actually care about Lucy, do you?"

Maxwell jerked to a halt. His hands clenched and unclenched, and he fumbled for words. "I . . . you . . . don't try to . . . she's just . . . a nice kid . . . that's all."

"So was little Nicky Adamsworth at the college . . . wasn't he?"

Maxwell glared at him for a moment and then looked away. "That was different . . . besides, I didn't put Nicky in the hospital."

"I see," Blackgaard responded solemnly. He took a breath. "Well, Richard, I *am* sorry about Lucy, but this is business. You can't let sentiment get in the way. If you want success, sometimes sacrifices have to be made."

Maxwell wheeled on him. "Sacrifices! Don't talk to me about sacrifices! I've lied for you! I've manipulated people for you! I'm trying to steal a computer program for you! I even got Tom Riley out of the way for you—"

"By burning down his barn," Blackgaard interjected smoothly.

"That was an *accident!* And don't change the subject! When it comes to putting kids in the hospital, that goes too far. Especially *Lucy!*"

Blackgaard leaned back in his chair again and laced his fingers together across his chest. "Really?" he said evenly. "And just what do you propose to do about it?"

Maxwell shook with fury. "I'll . . . I'll—"

"You'll what? Tell somebody?" Blackgaard chortled derisively. "Oh, really, Richard, sometimes you're too amusing. *Whom* will you tell? The police? Considering your less-than-shining track record with them, I hardly think you'll risk it. Whittaker? I'd love to hear that conversation."

He mocked Richard's voice, "Oh, Mr. Whittaker, I'm terribly sorry I put dear little Lucy in the hospital, but I didn't know she'd be foolish enough to run into the Imagination Station while I was sabotaging it with a computer program I stole from you."

He chortled again. "You see, Richard? You have no one to tell—*no one*. Even if you did, I'd simply inform on you. And who do you think the authorities will believe—a respected, multidegreed, middle-aged businessman, or a twenty-year-old punk with a criminal past?"

Maxwell's face flushed purple and his jaw clenched. He leaned across the desk and snarled, "Then I'll find another way!"

Blackgaard's coal-black eyes snapped. He rose slowly from his chair and towered over Maxwell, a sneer curling his lips. "Now you listen to me, *boy*," he growled. "I haven't spent the past five years of my life—longer, even—working to get into this town just to let someone like *you* ruin things." He poked his finger in Maxwell's chest.

Maxwell blinked and his eyes narrowed. "Five years?"

"That's right—*five years!*" He walked around the desk. "I tried to buy Whittaker's building back then, but he and his wife stopped me . . . I'm settling that score now, but that's nothing—*nothing*—compared to the importance of Applesauce."

"Applesauce?" Maxwell snorted. "I've seen it—it's not so great."

"You've seen *nothing!* Do you think Whittaker simply invented that program overnight? He was developing it long before he ever *thought* about Whit's End! Applesauce has power and potential you can't possibly begin to imagine. The things you saw were insignificant. Hidden inside the program is something of incomparable value. I've worked long and hard for it, and now that it's within my grasp, *no one*—especially a pip-squeak like you—is going to ruin it for me. Is that clear?"

Maxwell scowled at him. Blackgaard moved to him swiftly, grabbed him by the shirt, and with surprising strength, nearly lifted him off the ground. "I said, *Is that clear?*"

Maxwell breathed heavily but looked Blackgaard straight in the eyes. "Yeah," he said in a quiet voice, "it's clear."

Blackgaard released him, took a cleansing breath, and smiled curtly. "Good. Now, have you found out anything more about the password?"

"No," Maxwell replied sullenly. "I was on my way to do that when I saw the newspaper."

Blackgaard gestured at the scattered newsprint. "Well, now that we've taken care of that, don't you think you'd better get back to work?"

"Yeah." Maxwell nodded. "But I have some things I have to do around here first."

"And I have errands of my own to run, so I suggest we both get to it." Blackgaard grabbed his walking stick, moved to the office door, and stopped to check his image in a mirror hanging just beside it. "Richard," he said while gazing at himself admiringly, "you can come along with me, or you can stay behind if that's your choice. But get in my way . . . and I'll squash you like the little bug you are."

He made a quick adjustment to his ascot and collar, smiled and examined his teeth, and then turned and tapped Maxwell smartly on the shoulder with the tip of his cane. "Just remember that."

Blackgaard took a step into the hallway and then leaned back in and added, "Pick up that newspaper. Oh—and clean out Sasha's litter box. There's a good lad." He chuckled and left, his footsteps echoing down the hallway.

Maxwell stood motionless for a moment, calming himself. He then picked up and refolded the *Odyssey Times*, but when Sasha meowed at him, he muttered, "Forget it. I am not cleaning your litter box."

Instead, Maxwell moved to the mirror and checked his image. His face was returning to its normal color. He smoothed his mussed hair, smiled and examined his teeth. They were perfect as ever. He stared into his own eyes. "We'll see who squashes whom, Blackgaard," he said calmly. His gaze moved to the reflection of the computer on the desk. He smirked and gave himself a wink. "We'll just see . . ."

CHAPTER TEN



Whit sat at the counter in the soda fountain at Whit's End, sipping a cup of coffee. He needed a little time to clear his mind, and as usual, when he did that, his thoughts took him back to his boyhood days—his early years in Scotland, and later growing up in Provenance, North Carolina.

He had been around the world several times and had lived in many places in his life, but he was always drawn to small towns. He felt more alive in them, which he attributed to the wonderful experiences he'd had in them as a kid—though when he thought about those experiences now, he marveled that he had survived some of them.

Both his mother, Janneth, and his stepmother, Fiona, had told him that the Christian life is a grand adventure, to be experienced to the fullest. He very clearly remembered deciding early on to prove them right, and he believed the best places to do that were small towns.

Yes, he'd done good work and had great experiences during his Pasadena and Chicago years. But he felt he'd lost that sense of adventure in those places—no, not lost . . . forgotten. It had taken his son Jerry's death in Vietnam to remind him how important it was to

live with that sense of adventure. That was a big reason why he'd moved to Odyssey—to remember, and to pass on to his other children, Jana and Jason, and now to the kids around town, just what a grand adventure life, especially the Christian life, really is. It's why he'd turned to inventing, so he could help them understand. And now one of his inventions—the one meant to help them the most—had hurt someone, maybe seriously, maybe permanently.

He sighed, took another sip, and contemplated the dust particles dancing on the shafts of sunlight that streamed through the windows at this time of day. He wondered if there was a mathematical formula to predict their movements—Eugene might know. And then he further thought that since, as the Bible says, humans are formed from dust and return to dust, then wasn't he really watching *people* dance on shafts of light?

Eugene's voice brought him out of his reverie.

"Mr. Whittaker?"

"Over here at the counter, Eugene."

The young man appeared on the stairs. "Ah!"

Whit smiled and felt a great surge of affection for him. Eugene clomped down the remaining steps and crossed the room to join him. "May I ask what we are looking at?"

"Oh, I had just forgotten how the late afternoon sun really lights up this room."

Eugene considered the dust in the sunbeams. "Indeed. It reminds me of the pattern an electrical current makes as it flows through a microchip processor . . ."

Whit stifled a chuckle. Yep, Eugene would know all right. "I've never thought of it that way. I decided to take a break—we've been going at it all day. Would you care for a refreshment?"

"A glass of orange juice would be quite satisfactory."

"Comin' right up." Whit rose, moved behind the counter, and retrieved the juice from the fridge and a tall glass from the shelf.

"Actually, I just wanted to tell you that I've completed my check of the train set. The results are the same as with the other displays—no malfunctions."

Whit nodded. "Yeah, I figured as much. Here's your juice." He set it on the counter in front of him.

"Thank you." Eugene picked it up, took a sip, and gazed at Whit intently.

Whit smiled. "Is something wrong, Eugene?"

"Interesting. I was about to ask you the same question, Mr. Whittaker. You seem . . . distracted."

Whit slid back onto his stool. "Oh . . . I just feel like I should be at the hospital with Lucy instead of here fiddling with this place."

Eugene nodded thoughtfully. "Well, I really don't believe there is anything you can do there."

Whit sighed. "I know."

"Besides," Eugene continued, "Miss Kendall is keeping vigil. I'm sure she'll contact us the moment Lucy awakens. And since the authorities have allowed us to conduct our own investigation, it seems to me that your immediate concern is right here at Whit's End."

"Yes, you're right," Whit said tiredly. He looked around the room and muttered, "Sometimes I wonder if it's worth it . . ."

Eugene's brow furrowed. "Beg pardon?" He took another drink.

Whit gestured toward the room. "Keeping this place open—sometimes I wonder if it's worth it. Maybe I should just close it down for good."

Eugene nearly choked on his juice. "B-but why?"

Whit huffed. "Because it's caused me a whole lot of trouble ever since I first laid eyes on it! People have been hurt: my wife . . . you and Connie . . . and now Lucy."

"But look at all the people who've been *helped!*" Eugene exclaimed. "I'm certain each person you mentioned—and scores more—would heartily agree that Whit's End has been a bright spot in

their lives!" He put his hand on his chest. "I, myself, have benefitted in a number of ways from my time here!"

Whit shrugged. "Well, it's nice of you to say so, Eugene, but I just don't know . . . I tell you what—closing down sure would make my life a lot easier."

"Perhaps for a while, but a person of your creativity and intellect would soon become bored and listless." There was a pause, and Eugene swallowed hard and leaned in. "Mr. Whittaker . . . Whit . . ."

Whit perked up at that. Eugene disliked nicknames intensely.

Eugene continued. "You have so much to offer. Don't throw it all away because of an unfortunate accident."

Whit searched the young man's face. Though Eugene's hair covered most of his eyes behind his glasses, Whit could still see the sincerity in those eyes. He knew that Eugene had just done something that was very difficult for him—speak directly from the heart. He was touched by the young man's admission. It was actually remarkable, considering Eugene wasn't a Christian. Perhaps Whit's End and the people in it were having an effect on him after all.

He smiled warmly, and though he knew Eugene also shied away from physical contact, he reached over and patted his forearm. "Thank you, Eugene." The young man sat up a bit straighter, clearly uncomfortable, but he didn't move his arm. Whit felt another rush of affection.

He leaned back, took a deep breath, and said more brightly, "Well, whatever I do, we still have to find out what happened to the Imagination Station."

Eugene nodded. "Agreed. But I sincerely hope you don't close down Whit's End."

"So where do we stand?"

"Well, as I said earlier, all of the machines check out perfectly."

Whit shook his head. "We're obviously missing *something* . . . I just wish I knew what it was."

Eugene scratched his nose, smudging his glasses in the process. He took them off and cleaned them with his shirt. "I've been giving it some thought, Mr. Whittaker, and I believe there is a rather simple fact that we haven't yet considered."

Whit blinked. "Oh? What is it, Eugene?"

"It's probably unimportant," he replied, replacing his glasses, "but Mabel, your computer, was designed to keep a log of the activity on all the displays and attractions at Whit's End, correct?"

"Yes."

"Does that include Applesauce?"

Whit stroked his chin, and his eyebrows rose. "Hmm . . . I see what you're getting at, Eugene, and it's a good thought! A hacker! You think someone broke into it from the *outside!*"

"It is possible, isn't it?"

Whit nodded. "Very possible! C'mon!" They hopped off their stools and headed for the stairs.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



A few minutes and several keystrokes later, Whit confirmed Eugene's hypothesis. They stood at Mabel's keyboard in the computer room. The familiar hum of the machines filled the space. "You were absolutely right, Eugene!" He pointed to Mabel's screen. "See, these are all the times I've accessed Applesauce . . . and here are yours and Connie's run-ins with the program. Aside from those, someone else has broken into Applesauce on two separate occasions! First-rate thinking, Eugene! Well done!"

Eugene blushed. "Thank you."

"Now all we have to do is figure out *who* has been doing it—something the program doesn't tell us, unfortunately."

Eugene cleared his throat. "I believe the 'who' would be easier to figure out if I knew the 'why.'"

Whit frowned. "I don't follow you."

"Well, breaking into level one of Applesauce seems hardly worth the risk of getting caught," Eugene explained. "The hacker must be after something *more* . . . say . . . level two?"

Whit thought for a moment, and then took a deep breath and nodded. "I'm sure you're right again, Eugene. And again, first-rate thinking." Eugene's blush returned. Whit went on. "It's also time I told

you about level two."

"If you think it wise, sir," Eugene said seriously.

"I do. Let's have a seat out in the office."

They exited the computer room, and Whit closed and locked the bookcase door. As he walked to the chair behind his desk, he pointed to a chair in front of the desk, and Eugene sat in it. Whit sat and leaned on his elbows, rubbing his hands together. "Well, to start off, you know that Whit's End is not the only business I own."

Eugene nodded. "Yes, sir—you are also the chairman of the board and chief stockholder of the Universal Press Foundation, an encyclopedia publisher, whose subsidiaries include—"

"We don't need to go into all that," Whit cut in. "Anyway, several years ago, Universal Press was approached by members of our government to create a computer program that would aid in national security and defense. Because of my inventing background, I was deeply involved in the development of the program."

Eugene's jaw dropped. "Applesauce?"

"Yes."

"So *that's* why you didn't want us to know anything about it!"

"Yes."

"And why you fired us when we started it up!"

Whit shook his head. "No, I fired you because you disobeyed me—something I consider to be just as serious as knowing about Applesauce."

Eugene looked subdued. "Oh, uh, yes, of course . . ."

Whit continued. "Well, to make a long story short, it's a very powerful program with capabilities beyond anything we've ever developed. And up to now it has been top secret. Obviously, someone knows about it who isn't supposed to."

Eugene looked puzzled. "Then . . . why are you telling me?"

Whit leaned back in his chair. "One reason. Because if anything happens to me, I want you to destroy Applesauce."

Eugene bolted up. "Happens to you? Do you really think things have gotten that serious?"

Whit shrugged. "Whoever has broken in has already shut this place down, drained power from the Imagination Station, and put Lucy in the hospital . . . What do you think?"

Eugene sank down into his chair. "Point well taken," he said nervously. "Perhaps we should call the authorities?"

Whit shook his head. "Not quite yet. I want to know who we are dealing with first."

Eugene leaned back and looked at the ceiling. "It's obviously someone who has very little regard for the law . . ."

"Yes, and who also has a great deal of computer knowledge."

There was a pause, and then they looked at each other and said together: "Richard Maxwell."

Eugene sat up and nodded slowly. "He certainly has the ability, but I still question his motive. Why would Richard want Applesauce?"

Whit's eyes narrowed. "Maybe *he* doesn't."

"Then who?" Eugene asked quizzically.

"How about the guy he works for?"

Eugene's jaw dropped. "Dr. Blackgaard? Of course! He said Richard set up his entire network—he could have easily used that equipment to access Applesauce!"

Whit leaned forward. "I think Blackgaard has had him doing a lot more than hacking into my computer."

Eugene's eyes widened. "Such as?"

Whit put his elbows on the desk and folded his hands again. "First, he may be influencing Lucy at his boss's behest. After the place shut down yesterday, Connie mentioned that Lucy came by and wanted to see me, but she left because Connie said she was concerned about Lucy spending so much time with—"

"Richard Maxwell," they said together again.

Eugene shook his head. "He certainly is getting around!"

Whit nodded. "There's more to consider. We've established a connection between Maxwell and Blackgaard, but there is also a connection between Blackgaard . . . and Philip Glossman."

Eugene's brow furrowed. "I'm not following."

"Glossman has been championing Blackgaard's getting a business license ever since Blackgaard came to town," Whit explained. "And both Tom and I were distracted away from the council meeting where the vote to grant him the license took place. I was distracted by my meeting with Connie—a meeting that *Lucy* set up."

Eugene's hand rose to his mouth. "Oh, my . . . but Mr. Riley was kept from the meeting by something much more serious—his barn burning! Surely you don't think Richard had anything to do with *that*?"

"The police did find a kerosene can and a burned shirt behind the barn." Whit frowned. "I don't want to believe Richard had anything to do with it, but we have to consider all possibilities."

"Indeed," Eugene said gravely.

They sat in silence for a few moments, and then Whit chuckled softly. "Actually, Richard probably wasn't involved with the barn fire—with that cheap, awful cologne he seems to bathe in, we would have smelled him a mile away."

Eugene jumped out of his chair. "Cologne!" he shouted.
"Eureka!"

Whit lurched back. "Easy, Eugene!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Whittaker," Eugene said excitedly. "But I believe I have another connection between Richard and Glossman!"

"Explain."

Eugene took a deep breath and began to pace around the office. "After you fired me, I sought employment at Mansfield's Computers. While I was there, I ran into none other than Philip Glossman. Or

should I say *he* ran into *me*—quite literally, in fact. He questioned me about my work here, and then he suggested that I apply for the job in the computer department at Campbell County Community College!"

Whit looked confused. "I'm not seeing the connection yet."

Eugene held up a finger. "I noticed Councilman Glossman was wearing a very strong cologne—the *same* cologne that Maxwell wore when he visited Nicholas Adamsworth in the computer department! Until you mentioned Maxwell, Glossman, and the cologne in the same context, I couldn't put it together! It has been driving me batty!"

Whit cocked his head. "They could just like the same cologne—though I don't know why anyone *would* like it. But that brings up another possible connection as well."

"Which is?"

"Didn't Mansfield's Computers used to occupy the location where Blackgaard's Castle is now?"

Eugene threw his hands in the air. "To employ the colloquialism, '*Good Grief!*' Just how tangled *is* this web?"

Whit shook his head. "I don't know," he said seriously. "And it's all circumstantial—we still have no actual proof of any of this—or at least most of it. But it does strengthen the possibility that Maxwell, Glossman, and Blackgaard may be in league together."

"And their goal . . . is Applesauce," Eugene added ominously.

The phone rang, and Whit answered it. "Whit's End . . . Yes . . . She is? Wonderful! We'll be right down!" He hung up the receiver and smiled broadly. "That was Connie! Lucy's awake, and she says she wants to talk to me. C'mon, help me close up!"

"Yes, sir!"

CHAPTER TWELVE



Lucy sat up in her hospital bed and nibbled at some toast and tapioca pudding. Her body could best be described as one gigantic ache, but all of that pain was nothing when compared with what she felt on the inside. In fact, she would have gladly taken on even more physical pain if it meant ridding herself of the emotional and mental anguish she had brought on herself.

She dropped the toast back on the plate, then pushed the tray table away. Food tasted terrible, and she had the feeling it wasn't just because it was hospital food.

There was a gentle knock on the door, and she called meekly, "Come in."

It opened, and Connie poked her head inside. "Lucy?"

Despite the pain it caused her, she sat up straighter. "Connie!"

Connie came into the room and the door automatically closed silently behind her. She crossed the floor to Lucy's bedside. "The doctor said you were awake and that I could come in."

Lucy shook her head, and it felt as if it would fall off. "I have to talk to Mr. Whittaker!" she interrupted. "I have to tell him something very important—"

Connie put her hands on Lucy's shoulders and eased her back. "Now, calm down, calm down . . . Your parents told me, and I've already called him. He's on his way."

Lucy let herself relax. "Oh, good."

Connie removed her hands. There was an awkward pause. Finally, Connie asked, "So . . . how do you feel?" She immediately rolled her eyes and muttered, "Dumb question."

Lucy shook her head slightly this time, which felt like someone hitting her with a very stiff pillow. "No, it's not. I'm okay . . . Everything aches, though—outside and inside."

Connie nodded sympathetically.

There was another pause, and Lucy thought the silence was more painful than anything. When she couldn't bear it anymore, she burst out, "Oh, Connie! I've really messed things up!"

"Lucy . . ."

"I just got tired of being Little Miss Perfect and Lucy-Who-Never-Does-Anything-Wrong! I wanted to be different and try new things and be daring, and all I did was cause problems! . . . And then I was so mean to you . . . and I lied to you and Mr. Whittaker . . ." She felt tears welling up, and that hurt too. "I'm sorry, Connie. I'm so sorry . . ." And then the tears came, streaming down her cheeks.

Connie brushed back Lucy's hair and whispered, "Shhh. It's all right, Lucy."

"I've made this a rotten summer for everybody!" Lucy cried. "I got just what I deserved." With great effort, she raised her hands to her face and wept.

Connie moved to her side and hugged her gently. "Shhh . . . hush now." But she let Lucy lean against her and cry it out.

Strangely, or perhaps not, each tear that fell made Lucy feel less and less pain. After several minutes, she lapsed into sniffles.

Connie eased her back onto her pillow and faced her. "Listen, Lucy, I don't know about you deserving to be in a hospital bed. But I do know that no one expects you to be Little Miss Perfect." She took

Lucy's hands in hers. "You're gonna make mistakes, Lucy—you're gonna stumble and fall. We *all* do. You are human, you know."

Lucy sniffed. "Well, if I didn't think so before, I sure do now."

Connie chuckled, and Lucy broke into a soppy giggle.

"Besides," Connie continued, "I owe you an apology, too. I should've been gentler . . . more understanding . . . I guess I—I just feel . . . well, *protective* of you, that's all. You mean a lot to me, and I don't want to see you hurt . . . And I've got all the tact of a bulldozer." She squeezed Lucy's hands. "I'm sorry, Lucy."

The younger girl smiled—which also hurt. "I accept your apology, but you *were* right—about Richard and everything. It all seemed so simple when it started out, but now that I look back on it, it was so *wrong*. I don't know what I was thinking. That's a strange feeling . . ."

Connie nodded. "It's called growing up."

"Yeah, well, that's why I want to talk to Mr. Whittaker," she said urgently. "I need to tell him about everything—especially about Richard Maxwell—"

A familiar voice said, "Somebody mention my name?"

Connie and Lucy both started and looked at the door. Maxwell stood in the doorway, smiling complacently.

Lucy gasped. "Richard!"

He came in and moved to the opposite side of the bed from Connie. "Hiya, kiddo." His expression changed to concern and his tone softened. "So, how ya doin'?"

Connie still held one of Lucy's hands. "She was doing just fine until a few seconds ago."

Maxwell scowled at her. "I was askin' *Lucy*, if ya didn't notice."

"I'm fine, Richard," Lucy replied curtly.

"Kinda banged up, huh?"

Lucy nodded. "Yeah."

"That's what usually happens when a machine blows up in your face," Connie huffed.

Maxwell gave her a sneer. "Thanks for the update—if I need any more info, I'll let you know." He turned back to Lucy and said gently, "Did the doctor say how long you'll be here?"

"Long enough to get well, obviously," Connie spat out.

He turned to her and snapped, "Connie, I came to talk to *Lucy*—do ya mind?!"

"Yeah, well, I don't think you should've come at *all*, Richard," she snapped right back.

Maxwell scoffed, "What *are* you—her guard dog? Lucy, you wanna tell the Gestapo here to get off my back so we can have a conversation—in *private*?"

Connie opened her mouth to retort, but Lucy squeezed her hand, stopping her. "It's all right, Connie."

Connie glared at Maxwell and then said to Lucy, "Are you sure?"

Lucy nodded. "Yes, I'm sure."

Connie scowled at Maxwell. "Well, okay. But I'll be right outside if you need me—"

He cut in rudely. "Yeah, yeah, she knows, she knows, good-bye!"

Connie glared at him. Then Lucy tugged her hand and nodded reassuringly. Connie squeezed Lucy's hand, let it go, and headed for the door. She pulled it open, gave Lucy one last smile and Maxwell one last glare, and then left the room. Maxwell shook his head and looked back at Lucy.

She glanced up at him and then stared straight ahead, crossing her arms defensively, which sent a jolt of pain all the way up to her shoulders. She winced. "Okay," she said as flatly as she could, "we're alone. What did you want to talk about?"

Maxwell pulled a chair close, sat, and took a deep breath. "Well, uh, I read about the accident in the paper . . . and I just wanted to stop by and . . . well, uh, tell you how sorry I am—that you're in the hospital, I mean."

Lucy, still staring straight ahead, grunted, "Mm . . . is that all?"

Maxwell opened and closed his mouth a few times, then exhaled. “Uh . . . yeah . . . um . . . I guess that’s it.”

There was a long, awkward pause. Finally, Lucy said quietly, “I know, Richard.”

Maxwell swallowed hard and tried to smile. “Uh . . . know? Know what?”

At last, Lucy looked up at him, her eyes piercing. “About Applesauce . . . about how you’re trying to steal it from Mr. Whittaker . . . and how you tried to get information out of me.”

Maxwell’s head drooped. “How’d you find out?” he asked.

“I was in the hallway when you were talking to Dr. Blackgaard before the Imagination Station blew up. Oh, by the way, did you do *that*, too?” she asked sarcastically.

“I tried to stop him,” he mumbled. “I didn’t want to hurt anybody—especially you.”

Maxwell looked genuinely anguished—so much so that Lucy almost softened. She uncrossed her arms, and then steeled herself. *No—it’s all just an act!* “You used me, Richard,” she said. “Everything you said to me was a lie.”

His face contorted with sorrow. “Not everything,” he whispered.

She would not cry in front of him! She would not! She inhaled sharply and clenched her teeth. “Yes—*everything*.” She looked away from him.

“Lucy.” Maxwell sank to his knees beside the bed and clasped his hands together. “L-look, I know . . . I . . . lied. But I’m gonna make it up to you—to everyone! That’s what I came to tell you—”

She cut in. “You don’t have to tell me anything, Richard,” she said coldly. “You can tell Mr. Whittaker.”

Maxwell’s sorrow turned to alarm. “Whittaker?”

“Yes. He’s going to be here in a few minutes.”

Maxwell sighed heavily and muttered, “Oh, great.”

Lucy looked at him. "You know, if you *really* want to make it up to me, Richard, that's how you can do it—stay here and talk to him. Tell him everything!"

He shook his head back and forth slowly. "Lucy—"

"It's your chance to do the right thing for a change!"

Maxwell rubbed his forehead with his hand. "Lucy . . ."

"Please, Richard."

There was a long pause. He lowered his hand. "I can't." He looked at her, and his eyes were pools of sorrow.

She didn't care. She stared directly at him.

"You coward."

Maxwell withered. "Yeah . . . yeah, I guess I am." He took a deep breath and then rose. "Look, I gotta go. I have some business to take care of at Blackgaard's Castle."

She turned away from him again. "Whatever."

He hesitated and then crossed to the door, where he stopped and turned back. There was nothing but heartfelt sincerity in his voice. "Lucy, I hope—"

She was having none of it. "Go!" she snapped, cutting him off. "Just go!"

Maxwell closed his eyes, pain etched in his face. He took another deep breath, opened his eyes, and said softly, "Good-bye, Lucy." He then opened the door. Connie was right there. He snorted. "Come on in, Warden." Then he scooted around her and walked down the hall.

"Very funny!" Connie called after him. She turned and moved quickly to Lucy's bedside. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Lucy did her best to fight it. "Yeah, I'm all right." She burst into tears. "Oh, Connie!" She sank into her friend's arms and wept bitterly again. Connie rocked and comforted her.

Several minutes—or were they hours?—passed, and there was another light knock on the door. It opened, and Whit popped in. "Knock, knock!"

Lucy's face lit up. "Mr. Whittaker!" And then she cried even harder.

Connie stroked Lucy's hair and smiled warmly at her boss. "Hi, Whit."

He crossed the room and set the flowers he carried on the bedside table. His eyes filled with emotion. "I hope those tears aren't for *me!*" he said lightly.

Lucy looked up at him. "Oh, Mr. Whittaker! I'm glad you're here! I have so many things I have to tell you!" She lapsed into sobs again.

Whit sat on the foot of the bed opposite Connie. "No hurry, Lucy. I'm not going anywhere."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



In the basement office of Blackgaard's Castle that night, the tall, angular figure of Dr. Regis Blackgaard paced the floor triumphantly as he talked on the phone. Sasha lolled on the carpet at his feet and batted at his spats as he passed by her.

"Yes, yes . . . Now, listen. I want you to line up as many buyers as you can possibly get in touch with. Tell them this Applesauce program is the most fantastic thing they'll ever see—and to make sure they bring *lots* of money . . . Well, no, I don't have the full program yet—I still need the password to get into level two . . . Yes, I know time is short, but I expect to have the password very soon—"

He heard footsteps coming down the hallway toward the office, accompanied by whistling. He returned to the phone. "In fact, it may have just walked in my door. I'll call you later." He hung up.

The whistling got louder as Maxwell approached and entered the office, hands in his pockets. "Hiya, Doc. What's up?"

"Richard . . ." Blackgaard said warily.

Maxwell removed a hand from his pocket and pointed upward. "Didja ever notice how spooky this place is without any kids in it?" He gave a little shiver.

Blackgaard smirked. "Well, I must say that your attitude this evening is far better than it was this morning. Any reason for the change?"

"Yeah—a couple of 'em, in fact." Maxwell nodded cheerfully. "For one thing, I've been doin' a lot of thinking about what you said."

"I'm glad you took it to heart," said Blackgaard, bowing slightly.

Maxwell gave him a thumbs-up. "Oh, I took it to heart, all right. But the second reason is even better: I've just been to see Lucy."

Blackgaard licked his lips. "And?"

Maxwell polished his fingernails on his shirt cockily. "I got the password." He sniffed.

Blackgaard's face blossomed into a wide smile. "You did? Ha! I knew I could count on you, Richard!" He clapped the younger man on the shoulders and laughed joyfully. "Well done, well done! All is forgiven!" He motioned him toward the desk and the computer. "Well, don't just stand there! Come and type it in!"

"Okay—if you want me to . . ." Maxwell sat at the desk and began punching keys on the keyboard. "Now, let's see . . . I'll bypass the system's first level and get right to level two."

Blips and whirs came from the computer. Blackgaard clapped his hands together again, overjoyed. "This is wonderful! Applesauce is finally within my reach! After all these years, I'm finally going to get it!"

"Got *that* right," Maxwell muttered.

"Pardon?" said Blackgaard.

"I said, 'I think we're all right,'" Maxwell answered aloud. *Blip!*
"Yeah, it's all ready."

Blackgaard looked at the screen and his brow furrowed. "It is? Are you certain? It looks . . . *different* somehow."

"That's 'cause it's waiting for the password," Maxwell explained, rising from the chair. "You want to do the honors?"

Blackgaard looked very pleased. "Yes . . . oh, yes!" He slid onto the chair and faced the keyboard. "What's the word?"

"The word . . ." said Maxwell smugly, "is . . . *destruct*."

"Ha! *Destruct*," Blackgaard scoffed. "Couldn't Whittaker come up with anything more creative than that?"

Maxwell shrugged. "Guess not. Well, what are you waitin' for? Do it! Just type in *destruct* and hit Return."

"Gladly!" said Blackgaard, looking very much like a kid on Christmas morning. He talked as he typed. "D - E - S - T - R - U - C - T . . . aaaaand . . ." He twirled his finger around the keyboard. "Return." He punched the final key. "It's just such an odd word, that's all."

In the distance, a low hum began and increased in intensity rapidly. "Not really," Maxwell said. "It's actually very appropriate—for what's about to happen."

The hum continued to gain in intensity, and suddenly the sounds of the machines and games in the main room above them wafted down the hall. Blackgaard looked at him sharply. "What's going on, Richard?" He jumped up, shoved Maxwell aside, and bounded to the office door.

At the end of the hallway, he saw flashes from the main room at the top of the staircase, along with a cacophony of arcade sounds. He glared back at Maxwell. "Something's wrong!" He took off down the hallway.

"Give the man a silver dollar!" barked Maxwell. He smirked, returned his hands to his pockets, resumed his whistling, and jauntily followed Blackgaard to the main room upstairs.

There, though no one was playing them, all of the games and machines had sprung to life—beeping, whirring, blipping, chirping, singing, flashing, pinging, dinging, and racking up points all by themselves. Madam Ouga was spitting out fortune cards by the dozens. Blackgaard took in the scene, his face illuminated by the flashing and pulsing lights of the machines. Maxwell sidled up behind him.

The games sped up and the sounds increased into a perfect crescendo of pandemonium. “Oh—my—goodness!” Maxwell exclaimed. “This has to be ten times worse than what happened at Whit’s End—they don’t have all of the substandard machines you have here!”

Blackgaard clenched his fists and roared. He wheeled on Maxwell. “Why is this happening, you sniveling toad? What have you done?!”

“Taken you to level two!” Maxwell shouted. “But here, the game is over, Blackgaard. You lose!”

“You gave me the wrong password!”

Maxwell gestured to the bedlam. “Not at all—it’s working beautifully! And it’s about to get even better!”

At that moment, several of the machines reached their maximum electrical load capacity and began short-circuiting, some with miniexplosions. Sparks spewed out of them, and electrical surges shot around the room. Sasha raced around looking for cover and safety, and finding none, yowled mightily when sparks singed her tail. “Sasha!” cried Blackgaard.

“Now she knows how the horses felt at Riley’s barn!” Maxwell chuckled.

“You’re destroying my place!” Blackgaard bellowed.

Richard shook his head. “No, I’m not—you are!”

“What?!”

Maxwell moved to the soda counter, sat on the stool, linked his fingers and put his hands behind his head. “I rigged it so that a power surge would go through every machine in this building whenever the word *destruct* is entered into the computer downstairs. Works pretty good, eh?” He unlinked his fingers and gestured around the room. “*You* entered the word *destruct*. All this is *your* doing, not mine.”

Blackgaard turned back to the chaotic scene. “Stop it!” he thundered. “Please!”

Maxwell relinked his fingers behind his head and mimicked the computer voice. "Sorry, once engaged, the program can't be stopped or reversed."

More explosions, shorts, and sparks.

"Maxwell!!!!" Blackgaard bawled.

Suddenly, the shriek of alarms was added to the din.

"Ah!" Maxwell raised a finger. "And now for your dining and listening enjoyment—the alarms have gone off! That can only mean one thing: The building's on fire!"

"Nooooo!"

Smoke started filling the room, and small flames licked the backs of some of the machines. Maxwell bounced off the stool. "Y'know, if you want my advice, I think we'd better get outta here—this whole place could go up any minute!"

Blackgaard's face contorted with rage. "You're not going anywhere," he snarled. He pounced on Maxwell, grabbed him by the shirt, and fairly hurled him into the sparking, spitting, flashing, smoking, flickering electrical mayhem that the main room had become.

Maxwell screamed in terror and slammed up against the Zappazoids machine. He slid to the floor next to it, but the machine rocked back and forth precariously.

Suddenly Madam Ouga, the machine next to Zappazoids, overloaded and exploded in a shower of sparks and fortune cards, and the force of it sent the Zappazoids machine toppling over onto Maxwell, pinning him underneath. He screamed in pain. "Aaahhh! Dr. Blackgaard!"

Blackgaard strolled up to Maxwell casually, holding Sasha. "Oh, look, Sasha," he puckered in mock sympathy. "Poor Richard is trapped under the Zappazoids machine." Sasha hissed.

Just then, the fire flared up in earnest and began spreading rapidly.

"Aaah!" Maxwell groaned. "My legs! I can't get my legs out! Help me!"

Blackgaard chortled. "Help you? No, I don't think so . . ."

The smoke got thicker, and Maxwell started coughing. "C'mon, man! . . . The fire is gettin' closer!"

"Yes." Blackgaard smiled, "And it will get closer still. You may have won, Richard, but every victory has its price. Unfortunately, yours will be much greater than you thought."

Maxwell gasped for breath. "Dr. Blackgaard! . . . Please!"

Blackgaard smiled evilly. "Good-bye, Richard." He waved Sasha's paw. "Say good-bye, Sasha." The cat meowed.

They backed away, but to Maxwell's surprise, they did not head toward the front doors but toward the door marked Private.

"Hey!" he called after them. "Where're ya goin'?! Don't leave me! Don't . . . leave . . ." A cloud of smoke obscured the man and the cat from his vision momentarily, but when it passed, they were gone.

Maxwell burst into a coughing spasm. He could feel the heat from the fire, and it was getting closer by the second. "Please . . ." he whimpered. "Pleeeease . . ." But no one was there. He laid his head on the floor, closed his eyes, and prepared to die, hoping it would be quick, knowing he deserved it.

"Maxwell!"

Now I'm hearing things . . . so this is what happens when you die.

"Maxwell! Richard Maxwell!"

That voice is familiar . . .

"Maxwell!"

. . . and it's no hallucination!

He lifted his head and called out weakly, "Hey! Hey, over here! . . . Under Zappazoids!" He started hacking again.

"I see you! I'm coming!"

Maxwell looked up and saw a figure coming toward him through the smoke. He couldn't make out who it was at first . . . but as the figure got closer, he recognized him. "Mr. Whittaker?"

Whit crouched down next to him. "Can you move? Are your legs broken?"

"I . . . don't think so."

"All right, I'm gonna lift the machine, and you pull yourself outta there! Ready?"

"Okay!"

"*Lift!*" Whit strained with the weight of the machine. It inched upward ever so slowly until Maxwell was able to scramble out from under it.

"Clear!"

Whit let go of the machine and it crashed to the floor. "C'mon, let's go!"

Maxwell grabbed his arm. "Wait! Blackgaard's . . . still in here! He went . . . downstairs!"

"*What?!*" Whit called out, "Dr. Blackgaard!"

They headed toward the door marked Private, but before they got too far, a large beam came crashing down in front of them, blocking the door.

"We can't get by!" Whit yelled. "Dr. Blackgaard!" The fire roared about them, and the smoke billowed. "We have to go!" yelled Whit. "Now! C'mon!"

He grabbed Maxwell's arm. They stumbled through the smoke to the front doors and plowed through them to the outside. Smoke poured out after them. Whit pulled Maxwell away from the structure into the parking lot, sat him down, and then plopped down beside him. They both coughed profusely for several minutes, gasping for air.

In the distance sirens screamed, getting louder as they approached Blackgaard's Castle, now engulfed in flames. They watched the conflagration, and when he could speak again, Maxwell

asked, "You think he got out?"

"I . . . don't know . . ." Whit panted. "I couldn't . . . see anyone." More of the ceiling crashed down. "And so goes . . . Blackgaard's Castle."

Maxwell looked up at him, awe etched on his face. "You saved my life."

Whit nodded. "I did."

"But . . . *why*?"

Whit shrugged. "Well . . . two reasons, I suppose. For one thing, you have . . . a lot of explaining to do."

Maxwell swallowed. "Yeah . . . What's the other reason?"

Whit looked at him. "Your life is *worth* saving."

The sirens were very close now, and the rescue vehicles pulled into the parking lot. Whit stood to signal for the ambulance and missed seeing the tears that ran down Richard Maxwell's cheeks.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Whit, Connie, and Eugene stood in the computer room back at Whit's End. The familiar low hum of the machines inside underscored Whit as he told his employees and friends what had happened in the aftermath of the conflagration at Blackgaard's Castle the previous evening. "Anyway, by the time the police got there, Richard had confessed to a good many wrongdoings—including setting fire to Tom Riley's barn."

Connie crossed her arms. "So he was the one."

"Well, yes." Whit glanced at Eugene. "Though he claims it was an accident, and that he didn't come up with the idea himself."

Eugene nodded knowingly. "Speaking of which, what happened to Dr. Blackgaard?"

Whit shrugged. "No one knows. They didn't find any—well, *trace* of him, or his cat, in the rubble at Blackgaard's Castle, so we can only assume he got away."

Connie shook her head slowly. "Wow . . . and to think, all this happened because of a computer program."

"Yes," Whit replied somberly, "and that's one of the reasons I wanted you two here. There's something I want you to witness." He turned to the computer. "Mabel?"

Mabel blipped and whirred to life. “Yes, John Avery Whittaker?”

“Erase Applesauce.”

“Yes, John Avery Whittaker. Deleting Applesauce program.”

Mabel blipped and whirred rapidly.

Eugene and Connie nearly jumped out of their shoes.

“What?!”

“Really?!”

Eugene looked particularly distressed. “B-but why, Mr. Whittaker?”

Whit took a deep breath. “I created Applesauce to help people. But everything that’s happened with it has convinced me that, even though the program has incredible potential for good, it can also be twisted and used for incredible evil.”

“But all of your hard work—” Eugene moaned.

“Doesn’t mean anything if it hurts people,” Whit interrupted. “The risk is too great. I don’t want to take the chance that anything like this will ever happen here again.”

“Amen to that,” Connie agreed quietly.

Whit nodded. “All things considered, I thought it would be appropriate for both of you to see Applesauce put to rest.”

The computer beeped, and the whirring stopped. Mabel’s metallic voice announced, “Function complete. Applesauce deleted.”

“Thank you, Mabel,” Whit responded. “Shut down, please.”

“Shutting down.” Mabel’s screen went blank.

Whit took in a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “And that,” he said quietly, “is that.”

They all stood silently for a few moments. Eugene put his hand to his chest and looked as if he’d just found out the Pythagorean theorem had been disproved. Whit patted him on one shoulder and Connie on the other. Then they turned and went back into the office, Eugene bringing up the rear.

Whit closed the bookcase door.

Suddenly Connie piped up. "Oh, hey, I stopped by the hospital on my way in this morning and saw Lucy. She said to tell you they're discharging her this afternoon, and she'll be up and hopping around in no time."

"That's wonderful!" Whit replied, locking the door and replacing the key in *The Last Battle*.

Connie turned timid. "Well, yes . . . but the question is . . . will she have anything to hop around to?"

Whit's brow furrowed. "I don't get your meaning."

"In other words, Mr. Whittaker," Eugene jumped in as Connie shot him an irritated glance, "have you reached a decision about reopening Whit's End?"

Whit looked from face to face. The two of them stared back at him so anxiously he could almost hear their hearts pounding. He turned and placed *The Last Battle* back in its spot on the shelf. "Well, I've given it a lot of thought, and I just don't see how I can . . ."

He heard both of them deflate.

Connie muttered a subdued, "Oh."

He turned to face them. ". . . in anything less than a week, that is. I mean, we have to restock everything, and we're definitely gonna need some new wiring, and—"

He grinned and their faces got brighter and brighter; their smiles broader and broader, and finally, Connie lunged at him and wrapped her arms around his neck. He hugged her with one arm, while Eugene also rushed forward and pumped Whit's other arm in a hearty handshake. Whit laughed affectionately.

When Connie finally stepped back and Eugene released his grip, Whit put both hands on his hips and said, "Well, what are you both standing around for? We have work to do!"

Connie whooped. "We sure do! C'mon, Eugene!"

"Indeed!" Eugene exclaimed. "Right behind you, Miss Kendall!"

They bolted from the office, and Whit called after them, "I'll join you in just a minute!" He eased the door nearly shut, went back around to his desk, knelt down and prayed, "Heavenly Father, thank You for seeing us through the past few months, and for protecting us during them. Thank You for Lucy getting better. Help us to trust You more. And please help things to get back to normal around here—"

Through the crack in the office door, he heard his employees' voices rise: "All right, Eugene, why don't you handle the downstairs and I'll start up here—"

"Actually, Miss Kendall, I think it would be much better if *you* handled the kitchen and the counter downstairs, while *I* work up here —"

"Now, wait a minute! Why do we always have to do things *your* way?"

"Because my way is the better way . . ."

They continued, and Whit chuckled. "You are good, Lord . . . thank You." Then more seriously, "And help us face what lies ahead, in Jesus' name, amen."

He rose, took a deep breath, smiled, and then headed out of the office to join his squabbling, often exasperating, and always dear, dear friends.



"Thank You for Lucy getting better. Help us to trust You more. And please help things to get back to normal around here—"

Outside Whit's End, two figures—a man and a woman—sat in a dark car with tinted windows, listening to Whit pray over a small speaker. "He really believes, doesn't he?" said the man. He spoke with a Scottish accent.

"Yes," replied the woman. "He really does."

"And help us to face what lies ahead in Jesus' name, amen."

“What lies ahead . . .” The man raised an eyebrow. “Curious choice of words to end a prayer. Think he knows something?”

The woman shrugged. “He *is* John Avery Whittaker. You know how the Whittakers can be.”

The man chuckled softly. “Aye . . . I do.”

They heard Whit get up, leave the office, and mitigate the disagreement between his employees. The woman turned down the speaker. “Bug’s working beautifully—if illegally.”

“We have special authorization, thanks to Applesauce,” the man replied. “And it’s a good thing you planted it when you did, considering what we just heard Whittaker do.”

“True.” The woman sighed. “I had a feeling he would want to destroy the program—especially after the little girl got hurt.” She mused for a moment, then added wistfully, “Whit is a man of . . . special conscience.” She held up a portable hard drive. “But I can’t allow him to destroy our work.”

“Mm,” the man grunted in agreement. “At least, not when the security of the world is at stake.” He tapped the hard drive. “You certain you got the whole Applesauce program?”

The woman nodded. “It’s all here—trust me.”

“You know the general will want a copy of it for use at the Department of Defense.”

“I’ll see to it that the general gets what he thinks he needs.” The woman smiled.

“Some of the funding for this came from *their* budget, too, lass,” the man said reprovingly.

“And they’ll get what they paid for,” said the woman. “As for the rest, it’s not their concern. Besides, it needs more development.”

He shook a finger at her. “Just be careful.”

She looked at him scornfully. “What is it you always say? ‘You know the risks?’” She laid a hand on his arm and smiled. “I’ll be careful, Donovan. I promise.”

The car phone rang. She put it on speaker. "Twenty-three-sixty-two."

A warm voice came from the speaker. "Hi, Tasha."

"Jason!" she said with delight. "Headman and I were just talking about you . . ."

PREVIEW OF BOOK FIVE



It was late. The streets were deserted, which wasn't unusual for that part of Odyssey at that time of day, especially after what had happened there last week. A car pulled into the parking lot of what ten days ago had been a thriving business and the newest entertainment attraction in town but was now the burned-out shell of a building.

The car rolled across the lot and parked on the far side of the ruins, out of view of the street. Its occupant, a stocky, neatly dressed man with thick, longish white hair, large round glasses, and a rather bushy white mustache, shut off the engine and lights, exited the car, and headed toward the scorched building, moving with a slight limp.

John Avery Whittaker thought about recent events as he walked toward what used to be Blackgaard's Castle. Richard Maxwell, the young man who had caused the fire that destroyed it, was under arrest and locked up in jail. He had nearly died in the fire thanks to his boss, the owner and the place's namesake, Dr. Regis Blackgaard, who caused Maxwell to be pinned under an arcade video game.

According to Maxwell, Blackgaard and his cat then disappeared *into* the burning building. That's the reason Whittaker was there—well, *one* of the reasons. He needed answers to a good many questions.

He strode up to where the front doors of Blackgaard's Castle used to be and walked into the smoky wreckage. Though the walls were still in pretty good condition, the ceiling was a total loss, as were all of the games and machines inside. Their blackened shells stood like tombstones, silent monuments to better days, even if they'd been brief.

Whit clambered over heaps of ceiling debris and around the charred wreckage of the games, and finally reached his destination on this floor: a door marked Private. It, too, was seared, and the sign now read Pri . . te. Whit tugged on the door, and it opened rather easily. He pulled a flashlight from his pocket, slipped inside the door, and descended a staircase.

The flames had not come down here, though there was still a strong smell of smoke and dankness from the firefighters' water, which had trickled down the stairs and onto the floor of the corridor that stretched before him.

Both the police and fire departments had searched down here, but no trace of Blackgaard or his cat had been found in the hallway or in any of the rooms—even in the office. They assumed he had gotten out a different way upstairs, but Whit suspected otherwise. Lucy had told him about her encounter down here, and her discovery of the oddity in the wall.

Boxes stacked on both sides of the hall formed a kind of maze. He maneuvered around them, checking them as he went; most were completely empty. Then about halfway down the corridor, he came to a stack that wasn't empty. He pushed it over. The top box split open and out spilled an odd assortment of old newspapers and magazines. A quick check of the other boxes in the stack showed

they contained the same. There was nothing valuable about them; they were full so they could not be easily moved, and stacked to hide what was behind them.

Sure enough, when he examined the wall behind the stack, he confirmed Lucy's discovery: the outline of a door. It was very faint; one would have to either really look for it or run one's fingers over it, as Lucy had, to find it. But moving the boxes revealed more: The door and a bit of the wall around it had been recently plastered. The boxes, combined with the dim lighting in the hallway, concealed this very well. *By design, no doubt*, Whit thought.

He examined the door. It had no knob or handle. Whit pushed it, but it wouldn't budge. He traced the outline of the door with his light and finally found what he was looking for: At the bottom left of the door near the floor, a small screw protruded from the wall, again easily concealed by the boxes. Whit tried toggling it in all directions; it wouldn't move. He pulled on it; again, nothing. He then pressed it into the wall and was rewarded with a metallic *click*. He pushed on the door again, and this time it opened easily.

Whit stepped through the doorway and shined his flashlight around the space inside. It hadn't really been affected or touched by the fire above it. The room was filled with lab tables and accoutrements, mainly of a chemical nature—beakers and tubes and burners. Some were broken, but most hadn't been touched; indeed, much of the equipment was still in boxes.

Curiously, though, the company names on all of the boxes and equipment had been either scratched off or marked over. Blackgaard apparently didn't want anyone to know where they came from, and he also apparently didn't want his staff to know this room even existed, since Maxwell had said nothing about it when he was being questioned. The room looked as if it hadn't been used much, but was being *prepared* for use, and from the looks of things, massive use.

Whit shone his flashlight around the area. Nothing stood out, except for one small box sitting on a table. He could make out some of the letters of the company name on it: ". . . ebit.."

Strange. He pulled out a notepad and pen and copied down the letters as they appeared, spaces and all.

Whit made a perimeter search of the room but found very little until he came to a spot almost directly opposite the entrance door. That's when he felt a draft by his foot. At first he thought it came from the corridor, but when he headed that way, the draft disappeared. He shone light at the wall. It appeared normal, but then so had the wall in the corridor. He bent down and put his hand next to the floor. The draft was definitely coming from behind the wall.

He rose and pushed on it. It didn't move. He looked along the base for another screw, found one, and pushed on it.

Click!

This time, the door bumped inward. Whit pulled it open to reveal a large tunnel extending into the darkness. "So that's how he and the cat got out," he muttered. He pointed his light down the length of the shaft but couldn't see beyond a few yards. He took a few steps inside and heard a crinkle beneath his foot. He shined the light down; he was stepping on some folded papers. He picked them up, tucked the flashlight under one arm, and unfolded them. One appeared to be the blueprints of Blackgaard's Castle before it was Blackgaard's Castle. But when he examined the second one, his eyes widened, a chill went up his spine, and he nearly dropped the flashlight.

It was very old, had been laminated—no doubt to protect it—and bore the title "Odyssey Passageways" printed across the top in ornate lettering. It was a map of a network of interwoven tunnels connecting various spots around town. Two of those spots were Gower's Landing, which had become Blackgaard's Castle, and the Fillmore Recreation Center, which had become his own place, Whit's End. But that wasn't the cause of his reaction.

He had seen this map before.

At Whit's End.

He had found it stuffed between two wall studs when he tore out the plaster and lath while renovating the space that had become the Bible Room. He had sent it to one of his oldest friends who collected and studied antiques.

Jack Allen.

Whit tucked the map in his jacket and bolted back through the lab space, into the corridor, up the stairs, out the remains of the arcade, and toward his car.

He hadn't talked to Jack in more than five years, before he bought the Fillmore Recreation Center. In fact, the last time they'd been together was in Nebraska at the orphanage Jack ran—the incident with Clara. Whit had been so upset about what had happened he'd told Jack he didn't think he ever wanted to see him again. When he cooled down, Whit had regretted saying that and had tried to talk with Jack over the ensuing years, but they'd never reconnected. He had even sent Jack the map as a sort of peace offering, but Jack never acknowledged he'd received it. Whit knew he needed to get ahold of his old friend somehow, to make sure he was all right. Questions raced through his mind.

How had Blackgaard gotten the map from Jack? Was Glossman actually representing *Blackgaard* when he fought Jenny for the Fillmore Recreation Center all those years ago? Did Blackgaard plan to use the tunnel to sneak into Whit's End and steal Applesauce? How did Blackgaard even *know* about Applesauce to begin with?

He was almost to his car when a new thought struck him—one so frightening it made him stop dead in his tracks.

What if Applesauce was just a feint, the tip of the iceberg?

What if something much deeper—and far more terrible—was *really* going on?